Crossing Brooklyn Ferry

POEM TEXT

1

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

3

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,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south,
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water,
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in

their pilot-houses,
The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome crests and glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite storehouses by the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,
On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night,
Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.

4

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me,
Others the same—others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them,
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

5

What is it then between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me,
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body.

6

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,
The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?
Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting,
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The 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.

7

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

8

92 Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?
93 River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?
94 The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight, and the belated lighter?
95 What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach?
96 What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?
97 Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

98 We understand then do we not?
99 What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
100 What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

9

101 Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
102 Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
103 Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!
104 Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
105 Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!
106 Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
107 Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
108 Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public assembly!
109 Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my nighest name!
110 Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!
111 Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it!
112 Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you;
113 Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current;
114 Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;
115 Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you!
116 Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water!
117 Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters!
118 Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!
119 Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!
120 Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,
121 You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
122 About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung out divinest aromas,
123 Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers,
124 Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
125 Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

126 You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
127 We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,
128 Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,
129 We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,
130 We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
131 You furnish your parts toward eternity,
132 Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

SUMMARY

1

Rising tide beneath me! I see you clearly, as if you were another person standing right in front of me. Clouds toward the west, where the sun is half an hour from setting—I see you as if you were a person standing right in front of me, too.

Groups of people wearing your usual clothes—how strange and interesting you look to me! The thousands of people who cross the river on the ferry, heading home, are more strange and interesting to me than you'd think. And the people who will make this same journey years and years from now mean more

to me, and are more on my mind, than you might think.

2

The imperceptible way that everything, all the time, sustains me; the elegant construction of existence, and the way that we all fade away into existence but are still part of it. The way the past, the future, and the present are all alike; the sense of shining beauty I get from the very littlest things I see and hear as I walk through the streets and cross the river; the quick-flowing water carrying me far away; all the people who will come after me, the connections between me and them; the plain fact of all the people around me—their lives, and the way we love, see, and hear each other.

Other people will get on the ferry and cross the river. Other people will watch the high tide coming in. Other people will see the bustling ships around Manhattan to the north and the west, and the hilly terrain of Brooklyn to the south and east. Other people will see the big and little islands. Fifty years from now, other people will see all these things as they cross the river, just half an hour before sunset; a hundred years from now, or many hundreds of years from now, other people will see these same things, enjoying the sunset, the rising tide, and the falling tide.

3

Neither time nor place makes any difference—and distance doesn't make any difference either. I'm right here with you, people of one or many generations from now. The way you feel when you look at the river and the sky, is just how I felt when I looked at them; just like you, I was a member of a crowd; just like you feel restored by the beauty of the flowing river, I felt restored; just like you stand still, leaning over the rail of the boat, but still move fast as the boat moves, I stood still and moved fast; just like you look at the countless boats in the harbor, I looked at the boats.

I also crossed the river many times, back in the day. I watched the December seagulls hovering in the air, shimmying in the wind; I saw the sunlight striking them so that they glowed on one side and were deeply shadowed on the other; I watched them traveling in big circles, slowly moving south; I saw the summer sky reflected in the river; I was almost blinded by the reflection of the sun; I looked at the sunlight making a halo around my reflection in the water; I looked at the misty hills to the south and southwest, and at the purple-tinted, woolly clouds coming in; I looked at the entrance of the bay to see boats coming in; I saw the boats coming nearer, and saw the people aboard nearby boats; I saw the sails of sailing boats, and the anchored ships; I saw the sailors climbing in the rigging or straddling the masts; I saw the masts, the boats' bodies, and the flags; I saw the steamboats with their captains steering from their cabins; I saw the white trail those boats left in the water, and their paddle-wheels vibrating as they turned; I saw flags from all over the world being lowered at sunset; I saw the lacy waves in the falling night, their curves, their playful foam and their shining; I saw things getting fainter in the distance, and the stone walls of the warehouses beside the docks; I saw a darkening group of boats, a tugboat between barges, hayboats, and the late cargo boat; I saw the fires from the metal-casting factories blazing in the night, sending flashes of black, red, and yellow light over the roofs and into the streets.

4

All these things—and everything else—touched me in the same way they touch you, people of the future. I loved Brooklyn and Manhattan, and the grand, swift-flowing river. I felt close to all the people I saw, and to the people of the future who I knew would be thinking back to me, just as I thought forward to them. (Because one day I'll be gone, even though I'm here for now.)

5

What separates us, then? What does it matter that there are twenties or hundreds of years separating me from the people of the future?

Whatever separates us, it doesn't matter; neither distance nor place matters. I also was alive; hilly Brooklyn was my town; I also walked through the streets of Manhattan, and went swimming in the rivers around it. I also felt sudden questions moving inside me. Sometimes, walking through a crowd, I'd feel those questions—and sometimes I'd feel them walking home late at night, or while I was lying in bed. I also have been struck with sudden insights from my place floating in the eternal suspension of existence; I also have been who I am because I have the body I have; I knew that what I was, was because of my body, and what I would be, I would be because of my body.

6

You're not alone in going through dark times. I went through dark times, too. The very best work I'd done seemed empty and questionable; and weren't my grand ideas really pathetic? And you're not alone in being bad sometimes. I'm a person who knew what it was like to behave badly. I also got myself into the same old messes of stubborn behavior; I talked too much, was embarrassed, was full of resentment, lied, thieved, held grudges; I was cunning, angry, lustful, and wanted things I was ashamed to talk about; I was unmanageable, arrogant, greedy, shallow, tricky, cowardly, cruel; I behaved like a wild wolf, a snake, or a pig; I didn't lack dishonest looks, empty words, or the desire to cheat on people; I often resisted, hated, procrastinated, was cheap, and was lazy; I was just like anyone else, in the way they spent their time and in what happened to them. Young men called for me by my first name as I went past; I felt their arms around my neck while I stood next to them, or felt them carelessly leaning against me when we sat next to each other; I saw plenty of people I loved in the street or on the ferry or at gathering places, but never told them I loved them; I lived the same life as everyone else, laughing, messily eating, sleeping; I played my own self-conscious part in the human

drama, the same role everyone plays, that can be as grand as we like or as little as we like, or grand and little at once.

7

I'm getting even closer to you now. I thought of you just as much as you're thinking of me now—I thought of you well ahead of time. I thought long and hard about you before you were even born.

And who knew that I'd get what I'm getting out of such thoughts? Who'd have thought I'd be enjoying these thoughts so much? Who knows whether, no matter the distance in space and time, I might as well be looking at you now, even though you can't see me?

8

Oh, what could possibly be more grand and pleasing to me than Manhattan, all surrounded by the masts of boats? The river, the sunset, and the cresting waves of the high tide? The seagulls moving their bodies, the hay-boat in the darkening evening, and the late cargo boat? What gods could be more powerful than the ones I feel holding my hand, calling me by my name in their beloved voices as I come closer? What's more delicate and mysterious than the thing that connects me to the person who looks me in the eye? The thing that melds you and me right now, and fills you with the meaning of my words?

We get it, then, don't we? What I wordlessly assured you was true, don't you believe in it? What you can't learn from studying—what you can't learn in a sermon, we've nevertheless understood, haven't we?

9

Keep on flowing, river! Swell up at high tide, and sink down at low tide! Keep dancing playfully along, lacy-edged waves! Beautiful sunset clouds! Soak me in your glory, and soak the people who come generations after me! Cross from one side of the river to the other, numberless travelers! Stand up, masts of the boats around Manhattan! Stand up, lovely hills of Brooklyn! Pulse, perplexed and questioning brain! Generate some questions and answers! Float here and everywhere else, eternal fluid of existence! Stare, affectionate and desiring eyes, in the house, the street, and the gathering-place! Ring out, voices of young men! Call me loudly by my first name! Keep on living, life! Play the self-conscious role that lets people know they're acting! Play the role that's as grand or as little as one chooses to make it! Think, you readers, whether I might just be looking back at you. Stand firmly, ferryboat railing, to hold up the people who casually lean on you—but speed along at the river's pace. Keep flying, seagulls! Fly sideways or in wide circles, high up in the air. Reflect the summer sky, river water, and hold it there until everyone who looks down can appreciate it! Shoot out, crown of light, from around my head, or anyone else's head, in the reflections in the water! Come along, ships from further down the bay! Go up or down the river, sailboats and barges! Show yourselves off, flags from around the world, and be ceremonially lowered at sunset! Shoot your flames high, metal-factory chimneys! Cast dark shadows in the night! Throw red and yellow light over the rooftops! You, the appearances of things, now or from now on, reveal what you are: you needed skin on things, keep on wrapping up my soul. May glorious smells hang around my body, and your body. Flourish, cities: bring on your goods, your displays, your generous and just-right rivers. Grow, existence that is perhaps the most sacred thing of all; stay right where you are, objects more immortal than any others.

You're always waiting, you silent, lovely caretakers. We finally accept you with our senses, and from then on can never get enough. You won't be able to outwit us or evade us any longer. We use you, but don't discard you: we make sure you take root inside us. We don't understand you—we love you—you're perfect, too; you offer yourself up to the eternal; grand or little, you offer yourself up to the collective soul.

THEMES

THE UNITY AND CONNECTION OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is Walt Whitman's poem of human connection across the borders of space and time. On his way across New York's East River on a ferry boat, the poem's speaker feels linked not just to the people who are making this journey with him in the present, but to all the people who have made this journey *before* him—and to all the people who will make this journey long after he's dead.

This notion—that people throughout human history seen and felt, or will see and feel, the same things that the speaker is seeing and feeling right now—makes the speaker feel deeply connected to all humanity. And because everyone who has ever lived or will ever live takes part in the shared experience that is existence itself, the speaker suggests, no one is ever really alone. In other words, humanity is united by the mere experience of being human.

The sight of New York and all its people makes this vast human unity feel immediate to the speaker. While the city itself may evolve over time, the people who will live in the New York of the future will still have essentially the same thoughts and feelings that the speaker does. They'll admire the beauty of the city and enjoying the company of their loved ones, just like he does.

In thinking about the people who will make this same journey (and share the same emotional experiences) in the future, the speaker gets the sense he's actually "with [them]." This is because the speaker feels that he (and everyone around him) is "part of the scheme," taking part in the ongoing flow of existence, which is as continuous as the river beneath him. For

that reason, the separations of "distance" and "place" are only illusions, and don't really matter: every person, everywhere is united in the "river" of being—that is, merely by existing in the first place.

Since the people of the past, present, and future are thus all connected, everyone can take comfort in the fact that—no matter how lonely they feel—they're never really alone. Reaching out directly to his future readers, the speaker assures them that they don't suffer "the dark patches" of life by themselves: they have the company of everyone who has ever lived, and who *will* ever live. In fact, at exactly the same moment that readers of the future read the words of this poem, he suggests, he's "as good as looking at [them] now"—and it's only outward "appearances" that make anyone think otherwise.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-5
- Between Lines 5-6
- Lines 6-19
- Between Lines 19-20
- Lines 20-48
- Between Lines 48-49
- Lines 49-53
- Between Lines 53-54
- Lines 54-64
- Between Lines 64-65
- Lines 65-85
- Between Lines 85-86
- Lines 86-91
- Between Lines 91-92
- Lines 92-100
- Between Lines 100-101
- Lines 101-132

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" begins with a cry of surprise and delight:

> Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!

The speaker, readers gather, must be standing on the Brooklyn ferry itself, a boat that takes people across the East River, back and forth between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Below him, he sees a "flood-tide"—that is, high tide on the river—and personifies it, greeting it like a friend, "face to face."

This moment suggests that the speaker is *recognizing* the river, seeing it fresh, noticing its character as if for the first time. The same thing happens between him and the sky a moment later: the "clouds" and the setting "sun" also appear to him "face to face." It's as if he's having a sudden, powerful encounter with the world around him. And his exuberant exclamation points in the first line suggest that this encounter might be both beautiful and startling.

In other words, on his everyday journey across the river, this speaker seems to have had an epiphany—a sudden new insight into the nature of the world. And that epiphany will have a lot to do both with seeing the world "face to face," and with seeing other *people* face to face—even if those people don't, strictly speaking, exist yet. This poem will trace the speaker's joyful realization that he's connected to everyone who ever was or ever will be, across space and time.

LINES 3-5

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

Having joyously hailed the personified river, clouds, and sky, the speaker begins another apostrophe, this time to the people around him.

He's just encountered the wider world "face to face," as if he were recognizing a long-lost friend. Now, normal people on their daily commutes, "attired in the usual costumes" they wear every day, have suddenly become "curious" to him. That is, they seem strange—they inspire his curiosity. In this speaker's eyes, everything ordinary has suddenly become marvelous.

Take a look at the way diacope evokes the speaker's sense of wonder here:

> Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
> On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,

These close-packed repetitions make it seem as if the speaker is shaking his head in astonishment over these teeming crowds of "hundreds and hundreds" of people: "how curious, how curious!"

But it's not just the people around him who seem so fascinating all of a sudden. He also has other people on his mind: the people who will *follow* these people, who will make exactly the same journey "years hence," much later—perhaps even long

after he and all these crowds are dead. These people are "more in his meditations," more present in his thoughts, than they might think—and he tells them so directly, addressing them as "you." To this speaker, long gaps in time don't seem to get in the way of communication: he can speak to the people of the future as directly as the people of the present.

This ability to reach out directly to other people across space and time will become one of the major themes of this poem.

LINES 6-12

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

The speaker keeps marveling over the mysterious new understanding that seems to have dawned on him as he makes his river crossing. He starts trying to put that understanding into words, but all he can do is list an overwhelming rush of ideas.

Note how he uses anaphora and end-stopped lines throughout this section. The parallel structure of these lines, and the way that each new line is a self-contained idea, strings the speaker's thoughts together like "beads," just as he says in his simile in line 9. One flash of insight follows another:

> **The** impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the **day,**
> **The** simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the **scheme,**
> **The** similitudes of the past and those of the **future,**
> **The** glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the **river,**

The speaker seems to be thinking about the way that *parts* of existence relate to the *whole*, how each thing is a part of "all things." For example, when he says that every person (himself included) is "disintegrated yet part of the scheme," he seems to be imagining that individual people are dissolved into existence itself.

This moment might suggest the way that people disappear into death, but might also just suggest that the speaker has stopped feeling as if people are truly separate even when they're alive! Everyone is equally part of the "simple, compact, well-join'd scheme" of the universe, woven right into the fabric of things. In this image, the universe seems not just to be all-encompassing, but elegant, crafted, intentional.

That sounds a lot like what he's saying in line 6, where he observes that he's "sust[ained]" by "all things at all hours of the day," held up by everything in existence. Perhaps when he meets the river and the sky "face to face," then, part of what he's seeing is his *own* face, as if in a mirror: the whole world seems to be part of his own life.

The speaker feels that he's connected not only to all *things*, but to all *times*:

- The past and the future are laden with "similitudes," samenesses: the people of the future he addressed back in the poem's first section, for instance, feel the same to him as the people who are right next to him now.
- He feels strong "ties" between himself and all the people in the world who haven't even been born yet: after all, they, too, are part of the eternal "scheme." Just thinking of the "light, love, sight, hearing" of other people seems to be part of his sense of shared, connected, interwoven joy.

All these mystical ideas seem to have rushed to him from the "glories" he encounters on his regular old commute. The ordinary world has suddenly lit up for him.

Perhaps the river itself has something to do with that. The "current" that the speaker feels carrying him "far away" seems both literal and symbolic. The picture of the universe the speaker has just built feels an awful lot like a river: it's one big thing made of many little things, it's always changing and always the same—and it's beautiful.

LINES 13-19

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

Here, the speaker focuses on the idea that other people—even other people who aren't born yet—will share the experience

that the speaker is having right now.

Listen to the powerful anaphora in these lines, which creates a sense of building intensity and momentum:

> Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
> Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
> Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
> Others will see the islands large and small;

By now, readers will have noticed that the speaker has a special liking for insistent repetitions like these, and for firm, declarative end-stopped lines. These give the speaker's musings on the people of the future an almost prophetic tone: it's as if he's not just guessing the future, but actually seeing it, reporting back with total certainty.

These lines suggest that there are two kinds of continuity on the speaker's mind here. He's interested in the idea that other people will come after him, but also the idea that they'll experience just the same things he's experiencing: the sights and the bustle of New York City.

What's more, they'll "enjoy" it just the same way he does. He'll share with them not only an experience and a place, but a feeling.

But if this river-crossing is symbolic as it seems, part of the view that future people will enjoy will be a metaphorical "view" of life itself. All these "others" may also be struck by the same kind of epiphany the speaker is describing now, the same feeling of deep connection to everything and everyone, and of being caught up in the ever-moving "pouring-in" and "falling-back" of life's waters.

Once more, the speaker seems to deeply feel the relationship of the particular to the universal. Thinking about how other people will appreciate the sights and sounds of this specific beloved city, he's also thinking about how *all* people can (and will!) feel their connection to life, just the way he does.

LINES 20-26

> *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,*
> *Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,*
> *Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,*
> *Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,*
> *Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,*
> *Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.*

At the beginning of section 3, the speaker makes another imaginative leap. Now, he begins speaking directly to the "men and women [...] of ever so many generations hence"—an apostrophe that might give a modern-day reader, encountering this poem more than 150 years after Whitman's death, a little shiver! That's especially true because he begins speaking like a ghost, referring to himself in the past tense and to his reader in the present.

Of course, in one sense he's only being accurate: the very instant you've written something down, the moment of writing belongs to the past. But written language also has the opportunity to belong to the *future*, outliving its author but still speaking in that author's voice. And that's just what this poem has done.

The speaker seems to mean something even more magical than that. Listen to the amazement and sureness in his voice in this moment of diacope:

> It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,

That repetition suggests that the speaker is marveling over another revelation: time and space *just don't matter*. He's somehow right there with all the "men and women" of the far future.

Part of that sense of being *with* these people is that he knows he'll share experiences with them—a point he makes through more anaphora:

> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
> Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
> Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
> Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,

Here, the repetition of words mirrors what the speaker is saying about the repetition of *experiences*. The people of the future will behave and feel just the way he does on the ferry.

Again, however, there are hints that there's something more to this sense of connection than plain old camaraderie with future New Yorkers. For one thing, the speaker doesn't merely say that *time* "avails not." "Place" and "distance" *also* don't matter. He's speaking not only to the future commuters of New York (though they're certainly at the top of his mind right now) but to all people, everywhere.

But finding his way to that sense of universal connection seems to have a lot to do with immersing himself in what's right in front of him, right now: this bustling river scene, full of life. In the next stanza, he'll embrace that scene with gusto.

LINES 27-33

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south,
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water,

In this stanza, the speaker begins a long, lyrical description of all he sees around him on the river. He's still describing his present as the past: his immediate experience becomes the days "of old." But he makes those old times seem fresh, immediate, and lovely.

Listen to the rich assonance as the speaker watches seagulls riding the breeze above him:

> floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
> Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,

The sounds here do as much to conjure this sight as the imagery. The long /oh/ of "floating" and "motionless," for instance, feels as still and calm as the birds in flight these words describe. And every one of the assonant sounds marked here goes hand in hand with a partner, giving these lines a sense of harmonious balance. Gazing on these seagulls, these sounds suggest, the speaker truly feels that all is right with the world.

That feeling of harmony gets even more pronounced when the speaker looks from the sky to the water. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker greeted both the "flood-tide" and the "sun" and "clouds" in the sky like friends, "face to face." Now, the water and the sky *also* seem to meet face to face as the speaker watches the "shimmering track of beams" in the river.

Then, in a moment of mysterious communion, he looks over the side of the boat:

> Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water,

As the speaker gazes at his own reflection in the water, his own face, the sunlight, and the water seem to come together in one image. Here he's seeing *all* of these things "face to face" at exactly the same time—an image that suggests that he, the river, and the sun are all mysteriously united.

There's something holy about the imagery here. The sunlight seems to give the speaker's reflection a crown or a halo, sending "fine centrifugal spokes of light" shooting out from behind his head as if he were a saint in a medieval painting.

LINES 34-48

Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,
The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome crests and glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite storehouses by the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,
On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night,
Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.

From his encounter with his own reflection in the water, the speaker looks up and around him, appreciating not just the natural beauty of the sunlight and the seagulls, but also the bustle and energy of New York City's harbors. His grand, cosmic vision of connection is grounded in this very specific place and time.

The speaker first notices the landscape softening and changing color. All his imagery is misty: the fog rolling in becomes "fleeces tinged with violet," gentle as sheep in the sunset light. But the speaker sees through this "haz[y]" atmosphere with sharp clarity.

For a long passage, he looks at the passing ships with the same attentive eye he turned on the seagulls. Take a look at just the first few lines of a long passage of anaphora and general parallelism here:

> The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
> The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,
> The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in

their pilot-houses,

Once more, each of these similarly-shaped observations gets its own moment of consideration.

The speaker seems to be enjoying this scene with all of his senses. Listen to the alliteration at this moment:

> The white wake left by the passage, the quick
> tremulous whirl of the wheels,

These repeated /w/ sounds evoke exactly what the speaker describes here: the constant whoosh and splash of the water as big-wheeled steamboats pass by.

At last, the speaker turns from the river to the shore, where he sees the fires of the "foundry chimneys" (that is, the chimneys of metal-casting factories) throwing "wild red and yellow light" onto the buildings—industrial imagery that might seem almost hellish if the speaker weren't so clearly enjoying the sheer energy of the flames.

In looking at the specifics of the world around him, the speaker paints a picture of a world that *isn't* very much like what one would see on the East River today. Steamboats are mostly a thing of the past, and those "foundr[ies]" on Brooklyn's shores no longer shoot flames; if anything, they're luxury apartments these days.

And yet, the speaker's alert descriptions of all these sights bring them alive for readers even now. And they also capture something that *is* still true of the banks of the East River: they're full of life and commerce and crowds and dirt and energy. New York might be different now, but it's also very much the same.

Even the speaker's *tense* in this section reflects that sense of simultaneous difference and sameness across time:

- At the beginning of this passage, the speaker is writing firmly in the past tense, describing how he "look'd" and "saw" the riverscape.
- By the end, he's mostly writing as if the things he observes are still in progress, looking at how the "flags of all nations" are "falling at sunset," and how the foundry chimneys are "casting their flicker" over the rooftops.

The speaker also seems aware of the fact that his own time is impermanent and passing. This poem takes place at *sunset*, after all, and the far stretches of the river are "growing dimmer and dimmer."

LINES 49-53

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me,
Others the same—others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them,
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

Having completed his graceful, attentive picture of natural and human-made beauty on the river at sunset, the speaker turns back to address his readers in a direct apostrophe once more, reminding them of exactly what he's just demonstrated: all the lovely, enlivening sights of the world were "to me the same as they are to you." He has faith that the people of the future will delight in the same experiences he delighted in, even if some of the specifics of those experiences change with time.

To the speaker, in other words, another part of the joy of human connection is a certainty that "others" will feel what he has felt—that emotions, as well as experiences, repeat across generations. Anyone, he imagines, might look at the East River and feel the same delight he feels.

There's joy in sharing emotions with one's contemporaries, too. The "men and women" alive at the same time as the speaker are also "near to [him]"—a turn of phrase that at once suggests physical closeness, emotional closeness, and plain old similarity.

In these lines, the speaker suggests that *reflecting* on human nature is *part* of human nature. He's confident that future generations will "look back on me because I look'd forward to them": knowing that he takes an interest in the people of the past and the future, he can be confident that people of the future will feel the same way!

But these thoughts also turn his mind toward his sense that time is passing and life is finite. "The time will come," he observes, when he'll be long gone. But if the sun sets, it also rises: using the sunset as a symbol of death also gestures to the way that death isn't final, that life keeps coming back, and that people stay the same, mysteriously connected to each other across the centuries.

LINES 54-64

What is it then between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me,
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body.

Section 5 begins with some mysterious rhetorical questions:

> What is it then between us?
> What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

In other words: *what really separates the people of one era from the people of another?*

If people across time and space can:

- experience the same things,
- feel the same feelings,
- reach out to each other directly,
- and participate in the same continuous universe,

...then nothing, in this speaker's eyes, truly separates them at all: "distance **avails not**, and place **avails not**." His forceful diacope here (that repetition of the phrase "avails not") makes his conviction even clearer.

This bold declaration of universal human connection takes the speaker right back to thoughts of his daily life: of walking the "ample hills" of Brooklyn and the "streets of Manhattan island," just like the future New Yorkers he addresses. It's right in the middle of living one's ordinary life, the speaker suggests, that "curious abrupt questionings" of the universe arise: right when one is "l[ying] in bed" or wandering through "crowds."

This passage describes exactly what this poem has done so far! Remember, the poem begins when the speaker is making an ordinary commute across the East River, and suddenly sees himself (and everyone else) as part of the endless flow of existence. For this speaker, deep insight into life's big questions sprouts suddenly out of the everyday—and he's sure that's true for his readers, too.

He imagines this feeling of sudden insight as being "struck from the float forever held in solution"—a cryptic image that might be read in a number of different ways:

- The "float," for instance, might suggest the symbolic "river of life" that everyone swims in; to be "struck from the float" could be to be hit with a sudden insight from (and/or about) that river.
- To be "forever held in solution" might mean that the speaker (and everyone else) is always "suspended" in the river of existence, like a particle of dye dissolved into water.
- But "forever held in solution" might also refer to the "float" itself, and perhaps to a different kind of "solution": a mysterious *answer*.

There's no one right way to read this line, and that's part of the speaker's point. The relationship between people and the river of life is an intricately interwoven one, and the enigmatic language here suggests that the speaker's epiphanies about this relationship can't be put into simple words.

There's something similarly complicated going on in the last two lines of this section. Take a look at the speaker's use of epistrophe here:

> I too had receiv'd identity **by my body**,
> That I was I knew was **of my body**, and what I should be I knew I should be **of my body**.

The repetition makes one thing clear: these dizzying lines are about the speaker's body, and his sense that his body gives him identity and wisdom.

Readers familiar with some of Whitman's other poems, like "I Sing the Body Electric," will know that Whitman took the human body very seriously, seeing it not just as a container for the soul but as the soul itself. These lines seem to touch on a similar idea: having a body gives the speaker his "identity," his experience of being a distinct person among people. It tells him what he is—a human being. And it also tells him what he will be.

That final phrase—"what I should be I knew I should be of my body"—might again hearken back to all that sunset imagery. Knowing himself through his own body, the speaker perhaps also has one of life's inevitable realities in mind: every body will one day be a corpse.

But then, everybody is also part of the "float **forever** held in solution." Reaching out to people who will live long after him, the speaker seems to suggest that even death "avails not": human existence and human connection are forever. Everyone who is, was, or will be is a permanent part of the eternal river of being.

LINES 65-77

> *It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,*
> *The dark threw its patches down upon me also,*
> *The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,*
> *My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?*
> *Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,*
> *I am he who knew what it was to be evil,*
> *I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,*
> *Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,*
> *Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,*
> *Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,*
> *The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,*
> *The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,*
> *Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting,*

In section 6, the speaker moves from more mysterious thoughts about identity and connection into what almost feels like a heart-to-heart. Reaching out in another direct

apostrophe, the speaker assures his future readers that they're not alone when they find themselves going through the "dark patches" of life: he experiences every kind of anxiety and woe that his readers do, and behaves just as badly as anyone from time to time.

This passage feels grounded and honest. Listen to the speaker's self-doubt in these lines:

> The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
> My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?

Perhaps these moody, sullen thoughts counterbalance the speaker's epiphany on the ferry: even such "great thoughts" as those sometimes look "blank and suspicious" to the speaker once he's gotten into a "dark" place.

But there's also a hint here that the speaker doesn't take these dark patches especially seriously, that he really does believe in his "great thoughts" about an interwoven universe, deep down. The words "were they not in reality meagre?" are phrased as a question, after all. And he's offering these thoughts as a consolation to the people of the future, trusting that his deep belief in the shared human experience holds true.

In other words, while this passage reflects on doubt, it's also founded on the speaker's *faith* that other people will *share* his doubts.

Doubt isn't the speaker's only problem, though. He's also "knitted the old knot of contrariety," a metaphor whose densely alliterative sounds suggest that the speaker has gotten himself into some pretty tangled trouble. "Contrariety," or opposition, might be seen as a mood that undermines all the feelings of warmth and connection the speaker so deeply values. And most of the types of "contrariety" he goes on to list are to do with being, in one way or another, *selfish:* they're ways of taking advantage of people or putting oneself above others.

Take a look at the way the speaker structures just a few lines of his account of bad behavior:

> Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
> Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
> Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,

The intense asyndeton in this passage makes the speaker sound as if he could keep on listing all the ways he's been selfish or cruel indefinitely. It's as if he's making a full confession here.

Of course, anyone who reads this poem could make exactly the same confession (if they were being honest)! In admitting to all these very human failures, the speaker is confessing on his readers' behalf, too: after all, he begins this outpouring by telling his readers that it is not "you alone who know what it is to be evil." In the speaker's eyes, even behavior that makes a person seem more like a vicious "wolf" or a greedy "hog" than a human is pretty darn human.

Being a person, the speaker suggests, obviously doesn't just mean floating around in a bubble of goodwill and fellow-feeling and cosmic unity all the time. (Human history makes *that* fairly clear.) But seen from a certain angle, even selfish behavior can be a form of connection: it's something we all do, something we can all compassionately recognize in ourselves and each other.

LINES 78-85

> *Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,*
> *Was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me approaching or passing,*
> *Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat,*
> *Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them a word,*
> *Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,*
> *Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,*
> *The 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.*

Having finished a long catalog of the flavors of human "evil" he's tried out, the speaker sums things up with a flourish. Being a selfish, lying, cheating so-and-so from time to time just means being "one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest." In other words, bad behavior is part of human life, and can actually bring people closer to each other, seen from the right angle.

It only makes sense, then, that the speaker would leap off from that realization into a very different kind of reminiscence. Now, he describes his feelings of easy love and connection with a group of anonymous "young men." Listen to the parallelism here:

> Was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw me approaching or passing,
> Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat,
> Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet never told them a word,

Centered on loving actions, these unhurried lines feel very different from the speaker's short, punchy, caesura-riddled confessions: "Blabb'd, || blush'd, || resented, || lied, || stole, || grudg'd."

The speaker's specific reminiscences here feel both affectionate and erotic. Calling the speaker's "nighest name" (perhaps a nickname or a pet name), throwing their arms around his neck, these young men seem to have a pretty

intimate relationship with the speaker. He remembers, in particular, the "negligent leaning of their flesh against me"—an image that might evoke a private thrill over someone's absentminded touch.

Yet even these very specific-sounding memories are part of the "same life with the rest," the speaker goes on—once again demonstrating his deep faith that even his most personal experiences belong, in a way, to everyone.

That's because everyone, in his eyes, is playing the "same old role." This stanza closes on an extended metaphor that readers might find familiar: the idea that the world is a stage and people are just actors appears everywhere from Shakespeare to Wordsworth.

Perhaps these lines might make readers think back to the speaker's mysterious ideas about receiving "identity by [his] body" back in line 63: getting born as a human might also mean taking on a "role." If that's true, giving up one's body when one dies might be something like stepping off stage, going back to "real life."

In other words: if the reality of existence is that all people are connected to each other (and to everything else), as the speaker's early epiphany suggests, then death might just mean giving up one's temporary "role"—one's illusion of a *separate* existence, the very thing that allows for the selfishness the speaker described earlier.

If everyone is just acting a part in the play of life, the speaker concludes, life can be whatever people want it to be, just as "great" or "small" as they choose—"or both great and small," important and humble at exactly the same time. That sounds a lot like what he's had to say about his experiences so far: his "small," ordinary commute can become a source of "great" and mystical wisdom.

LINES 86-91

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.
Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

In section 7, the speaker draws even "closer" to his future readers: these stanzas make it sound almost as if the speaker is whispering to the people of the future, slinging an arm around their necks like the friends who called him by his "nighest name" back in line 79.

He "laid [his] stores in advance," he assures his readers: he saved up plenty of thoughts about the people who would come after him "before [they] were born," thinking just as much about them as they think about him now.

These lines bubble over with wonder. Listen to the speaker's rhetorical questions here:

> Who was to know what should come home to me?
> Who knows but I am enjoying this?
> Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

All those questions suggest that the speaker isn't just delighted, but *amazed* at the idea that he's as good as meeting the people of the future "face to face" even as he stands here on the ferry. (Remember, that's still where he is—his thoughts have wandered all over the place, but the "action" of the poem is rooted on that boat!)

The unpredictable energy he feels coming "home" to him during his experience seems to have a lot in common with his joyful, "face to face" encounter with the river and the sky in the poem's first lines. Even if the people of the future "cannot see" him, he still feels as if he's "as good as looking" at them, meeting them directly, seeing his human fellowship with him—and the idea gives him a thrill.

Again, perhaps the reader feels a little thrill here, too. The speaker's apostrophes are pointed so insistently at everyone who reads this poem that the reader might really sense the speaker's eyes resting on them as they rest their eyes on his words: yes, it's "you" he "consider'd long and seriously," hundreds of years ago.

Part of the wonder of this direct encounter is how delightful it is—how the speaker is "enjoying this." In this section of the poem, it's as if he's caught up in marvel, not just over his epiphanies about human connection, but at the sheer pleasure of having such epiphanies.

LINES 92-97

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?
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?
What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach?
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

The speaker's gleeful, wondering realization of his own "enjoy[ment]" takes him right back to the sights and sounds of "mast-hemm'd Manhattan." As he turns his attention from the readers of the future back to the riverscape around him, he repeats some of the exact same language he used back in section 3, returning to the "sea-gulls oscillating their bodies"

and the "belated lighter" (or delayed cargo boat). This repetition makes it sound as if he's greeting these sights like old friends, appreciating again the new understanding of the universe they've helped to give him.

And even his *actual* old friends seem transformed in the light of his epiphanies. Not even the "gods," he says, can "exceed" his affectionate friends, who call him once more by his "nighest name." His sudden understanding of human connection seems to make the ordinary world feel *sacred* to him. Perhaps this mention of the "gods" might take the reader back to the moment in stanza 3 when the speaker saw his own reflection shining in a heavenly halo of sunlight.

Every single line in section 8 of the poem is phrased as a rhetorical question, for reasons that become clearer and clearer as the speaker moves from the scene around him back into more abstract philosophizing. Listen to these big questions, for instance:

> What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?
> Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

Whatever thread or substance or "float eternally held in solution" connects the speaker to everyone else, it's not something that's easy to put into words! It's so "subtle" that it almost *needs* to be presented in the form of a question: it's a deep mystery.

Whatever it is, it doesn't just give the speaker a way to wave hello to his later readers, but "fuses" him with them, unifying them. This is a much deeper connection than plain old fellow-feeling. It's an idea that hearkens back to the speaker's earlier lines about how every single person is "disintegrated yet part of the scheme," no longer a bunch of separate selves playing their temporary "role[s]," but seamless parts of one big continuous universe.

LINES 98-100

> *We understand then do we not?*
> *What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?*
> *What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?*

Feeling profoundly at one with all humanity—past, present, and future—the speaker closes this section with more rhetorical questions, questions that suggest that he doesn't even need to spell out his experience for his future readers. Since he's "fuse[d] into" everyone else, he has faith that his "meaning" will "pour[]" effortlessly into them.

"We understand then do we not?" he says, in an apostrophe that feels at once majestic and droll. It's as if he feels that he and his readers are sharing a profound insight and a wonderful joke at exactly the same time. His readers, he trusts, must be "enjoying this" as much as he is, caught up in the sheer pleasure of glimpsing the grand pattern of existence.

And once more, this understanding seems to go deeper than words. It's something communicated and "accepted" without anybody "mentioning it"; it can't be taught, and it won't fit into a sermon (though the mention of "study" and "preaching" suggests that education and religion are two ways that people might try to reach toward such an understanding). But somehow, it "pours" from one person into another anyway.

That flowing understanding hearkens back to the symbolic river of life, and also suggests yet another way of looking at that river. Perhaps the flowing, meandering "pour[]" of meaning also evokes this poem itself: an overflowing stream of language that carries an experience from the speaker into the reader.

On the one hand, the speaker has just pointed out that the transcendent experience he's talking about can't be taught or preached, and doesn't completely fit into words. On the other hand, what is this whole poem if it isn't an effort to put a transcendent experience into words?

Paradoxically, poetry communicates what the speaker has experienced, not just through the words he writes, but through the words he holds back: the things he "promis[es] without mentioning," the "questionings" that point to something unutterably grand behind his description of his epiphany on the river.

LINES 101-113

> *Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!*
> *Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!*
> *Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!*
> *Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!*
> *Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!*
> *Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!*
> *Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!*
> *Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public assembly!*
> *Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my nighest name!*
> *Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!*
> *Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it!*
> *Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you;*
> *Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current;*

The speaker launches into the final section of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" with joy. Just as he did at the beginning of the poem, he addresses the world around him in an exuberant apostrophe, speaking to the personified landscape and living people in just the same terms. His parallelism here underlines his sense that everyone and everything he's talking to is somehow the same, all part of the same fabric of existence:

> Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
> Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!
> Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
> Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!

Not only does the speaker see all these separate entities as essentially the same, he also encourages them all to do the same thing: exactly what they've been doing! He doesn't want a single thing around him to be different. It's as if he's telling the whole universe, *you just keep being you, buddy*.

He underlines that encouragement with more repetitions, returning to language that readers will by now find familiar—from "scallop-edg'd waves" still breaking to the sound of "young men" still calling his "nighest name."

But while these lines encourage the world to stay just the same, they also encourage it to stay active: nearly all of the lines in this section begin with verbs. In the speaker's eyes, then, even as existence *moves*, it also stays the *same:* it's always *doing*, but doing just what it's *always* done.

To quote the speaker himself, all the way back in line 25, existence at once stands still and "hurr[ies] with the swift current." In other words, life moves just like a person on a ferry making a river crossing.

LINES 114-119

> *Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;*
> *Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you!*
> *Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water!*
> *Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters!*
> *Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!*
> *Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!*

Continuing his grand apostrophe to everyone and everything around him, the speaker keeps returning to ideas and language he used earlier in the poem.

Here, he revisits his experience of looking from the "wheel[ing]" seagulls to his own reflection in the water. But this time, he sees things slightly differently:

> Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water!

The last time the speaker gazed at his reflection, he saw an image of unity. The river held his own face, the sunlight, and the water together, making them all part of the same thing—an image that, to him, both literally and metaphorically "reflects" a great truth about the nature of the universe.

Now, he takes that idea even further. That brilliantly haloed reflection in the water could be not just his head, but "any one's head": his sense of deep connection with all humanity makes his own face feel like anyone and everyone's face.

Meanwhile, he's still encouraging everything around him, from the boats to the flags to the foundries, to keep playing their "role" in the drama of life, doing what they always do and always will do. As he revisits all these familiar images in turn, his repetitions underline his sense that all these things play an eternal and integral part in existence, just the same way that people do.

Just because the East River will change, in other words, doesn't mean that the particular boats and flags and foundries the speaker sees now will disappear altogether! They'll *always have existed*, and they'll always be a part of the river of reality. (And, it's worth noting, the people of the future will know about them and see them in their minds' eyes, precisely because this speaker chose to write about them.)

That sense that everything the speaker sees is both passing and eternal will shape the poem's last lines.

LINES 120-125

> *Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,*
> *You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,*
> *About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung out divinest aromas,*
> *Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers,*
> *Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,*
> *Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.*

Having revisited all the sights that inspired him earlier in the poem, the speaker now addresses them all at once—in a rather mysterious way. Every bird, every boat, every leaping fire now falls under one heading: "Appearances." The outward appearances of things are the "necessary film" that wraps around "the soul."

These lines might recall the speaker's earlier theatrical

metaphor, in which everyone plays a "role" in the drama of life. Here *everything* seems to be an "actor," a part of eternity getting dressed up in the costume of something transient. That acting isn't deceptive or false, but "necessary" and "lasting."

Perhaps the easiest way to feel what's going on in these beautiful, enigmatic lines is to think in terms of a heartbeat: a rhythmic pulse that moves constantly back and forth between two different states. To this speaker:

- Since everything and everyone is equally and eternally a part of the universe, everything is really *one* thing, and outward differences are just a changeable "appearance," like a thin "film" wrapped around reality.
- But by the same token, all of those transient appearances are real, important, and beautiful: they're also part of eternity.

What the speaker has seen on his river journey, in other words, is that everything and everyone in the universe is eternal and connected, and that this eternal connectedness *appears through* transient things. It's that good old river symbolism again: life's permanent identity, like a river's, paradoxically *comes from* constant flow and change.

It makes sense, then, that the last two parallel commands in this stanza should be these ones:

> Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
> Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

Telling all of existence at once to grow and to stay just where it is, the speaker seems fully immersed in the river of life. And that's a deeply joyful experience: even the New York air seems full of "divinest aromas" to this speaker, when he understands he's in his rightful, eternal place in the ever-changing, ever-the-same universe.

LINES 126-132

> *You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,*
> *We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,*
> *Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,*
> *We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,*
> *We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,*
> *You furnish your parts toward eternity,*
> *Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.*

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" closes with a mixture of all the feelings the speaker has experienced so far: awe, delight, joy, solemnity, and gratitude all come together in these last lines.

In the apostrophes of the final stanza, the speaker bids a fond farewell to the riverscape—a riverscape that will always be with him, both because it's given him an unforgettable epiphany and because he's immortalized it in poetry.

His tone here suggests that there's a whole new understanding between him and everything he sees: all the sights of the river "have waited" for him to see them this way. These "dumb" (that is, silent) "ministers" are *always* lying in wait, in fact, just biding their time until someone notices what they have to reveal about the nature of the universe. As "ministers," they might be both helpers and preachers, waiting to declare the deep and lovely truth of eternal connection.

As soon as people learn to see the world the right way, the speaker suggests, they develop "free sense," a liberated and joyful new kind of perception that one can never get enough of. Get just a taste of this perspective on life and eternity, and one becomes "insatiate," endlessly hungry for it. That joyful desire for things to be just the way they are, that spiritual delight in the everyday, becomes a "permanent[]" fixture of one's life, "plant[ed]" and growing in one's soul: this speaker, for instance, will always remember this particular day on the river, in all its specificity.

This realization is for everyone. The speaker sweeps up all of humanity in his language here: it is "we" who have this experience, not just him. That's true in more ways than one. By recording his epiphany here, and by reaching out to directly connect with his readers, this speaker has written a poem that *does* exactly what it *describes*.

The very shape of this poem mimics the flow of the East River and the flow of the symbolic river of life itself. A poem, like those rivers, both flows and changes as the reader moves through it, and remains eternally constant—and it allows people to share an experience as if they were one person. By the end of this poem, readers have stood exactly where the speaker stands, seeing their own reflection in the water.

It's all too much to "fathom": all the speaker can do is "love" everything he sees around him, embracing its fleeting "perfection" and feeling deeply that not one "part[]" of it will ever be truly lost. Time passes, things change, people come and go—but they're all held together in the embrace of eternity, the total, beautiful "soul" of the universe, the current that hurries and stands still.

SYMBOLS

THE RIVER

The river that the speaker crosses is a symbol of the continuous flow of time and existence.

A river is something that's both constantly changing and always the same. The water keeps passing through, but the river itself stays where it is. In this speaker's eyes, the exact same thing is true about the whole universe. Time and people pass through the universe like a river's flowing waters, coming and going, but they're all part of one big, unchanging thing: existence itself.

It makes a lot of sense, then, that the speaker should have a revelation about how the people of the past, present, and future are all connected as he crosses a river: feeling himself moved along by its flow, he's also able to imagine all the people before and after him who will be moved along in just the same way.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!"
- **Line 22:** "Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,"
- **Lines 24-25:** "Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd, / Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,"
- **Line 27:** "I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,"
- **Line 50:** "loved well the stately and rapid river,"
- **Line 93:** "River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?"
- **Line 101:** "Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!"
- **Line 113:** "Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current;"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

There are a couple of important flavors of apostrophe in this poem: apostrophes to the landscape, and apostrophes to the people of the future. Addressing the river and his readers with equal ease, the speaker suggests that people and the world are all somehow together, sharing one big, eternal consciousness.

The entire first section of the poem is an apostrophe and sets the tone for all that follows. First, take a look at the speaker's address to the world around him:

> Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
> Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face.

To this speaker, the personified "flood-tide" of the river below, and the "clouds" and "sun" above, are creatures he can address "face to face," people he can greet with exuberant affection. The whole world, in his eyes, is alive. Calling out to the river and the sky this way, the speaker seems at once worshipful and informal: he's meeting the world itself as a friend and an equal, but also as something astonishing, something to be addressed with a degree of formal respect.

When, a moment later, he addresses plain old people, his tone gets a little bit gentler:

> Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
> On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
> And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

From greeting the whole world "face to face," the speaker turns now to noticing how "curious" the people around him seem: in other words, they seem almost strange, inspiring his curiosity and fascination. That feels like a more everyday feeling than the sense that one is greeting a river.

But things get more mystical when the speaker starts addressing people who haven't even been born yet—a moment that might give modern-day readers, approaching this poem more than 150 years after it was written, a little jolt.

In this speaker's eyes, there seems to really be no difference between speaking to the world, the people around him, and all the people who will come after him. As he puts it in line 91: "Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?"

Apostrophe is thus at the very heart of the poem's philosophy. To this speaker, everyone that has lived, lives, or will live is within his reach, and so is the whole world: he can speak directly to everybody and everything.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face! / Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face. / Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me! / On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose, / And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations,

than you might suppose."

- **Lines 21-26:** "I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence, / Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt, / Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd, / Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd, / Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried, / Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd."
- **Line 49:** "These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,"
- **Lines 54-55:** "What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?"
- **Line 65:** "It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,"
- **Lines 86-88:** "Closer yet I approach you, / What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance, / I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born."
- **Line 91:** "Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?"
- **Line 97:** "Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?"
- **Lines 98-99:** "We understand then do we not? / What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?"
- **Lines 101-125:** "Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide! / Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves! / Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me! / Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers! / Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn! / Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers! / Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution! / Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public assembly! / Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my nighest name! / Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress! / Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it! / Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you; / Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current; / Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air; / Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you! / Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water! / Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters! / Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset! / Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses! / Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are, / You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul, / About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung out divinest aromas, / Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers, / Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual, / Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting."
- **Lines 126-132:** "You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers, / We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward, / Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us, / We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us, / We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also, / You furnish your parts toward eternity, / Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker's rhetorical questions give the poem a sense of both conviction and mystery.

On the one hand, some of the rhetorical questions the speaker asks don't need an answer because he feels the answer is obvious: he's passionately persuaded that time and space "avail[] not," that all people are somehow together in the shared human experience.

For instance, take a look at the opening lines of section 5:

> What is it then between us?
> What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Here, these questions imply their own answer: in the speaker's eyes, there's *nothing* "between" him and the people of the future. Or if there is something, "Whatever it is," it doesn't matter one bit: people are never truly separated in any important way.

On the other hand, some of the rhetorical questions here are actually *unanswerable*. That cosmic togetherness the speaker believes in is deeply mysterious, and pretty hard to wrap one's head around!

In section 8, for instance, the speaker's questions get a lot more enigmatic:

> We understand then do we not?
> What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
> What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

These rhetorical questions suggest that, through this poem, the speaker and the readers are sharing an "understand[ing]" of the universe that can't quite be put into words. It can't be taught or delivered as a sermon: it can only be felt, somewhere deep down past easy explanations.

The poem's rhetorical questions thus suggest that the shared human experience is at once a plain fact, and the most mysterious and wondrous thing there is.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 54-55:** "What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?"
- **Line 68:** "My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?"
- **Lines 89-91:** "Who was to know what should come home to me? / Who knows but I am enjoying this? / Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?"
- **Lines 92-100:** "Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan? / 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? / What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach? / What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face? / Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you? / We understand then do we not? / What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted? / What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?"

END-STOPPED LINE

Every line in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is end-stopped. That's not unusual in Whitman's work: firm end-stopped lines help to give his poems their bold, declarative tone. Here, end-stopped lines also help to evoke the way the speaker slowly turns his gaze from one lovely sight to another, caught up in the riverside bustle around him.

For instance, take a look at this passage from the third section of the poem:

> I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
> Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
> Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,
> Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south,
> Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,

Here, end-stopped lines mark off each individual sight the speaker observes and evoke his meditative, almost hypnotized attention. When he looks at the seagulls, for instance, he spends a whole line thinking about how they move, and then a different line thinking about how they look, and then yet another line thinking about where they're going. The end-stops give each of these separate-but-related thoughts its own pocket of unhurried time.

End-stops also make the speaker's grand embrace of humanity and the universe feel even more emphatic. Take the beginning of section 9, for instance:

> Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
> Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
> Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!
> Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
> Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn!

Not only are these lines end-stopped, they're also end-stopped with exclamation points—a choice that makes this passage sound like one joyous cry after another.

End-stops thus help to give readers a sense of this speaker's beliefs and personality. These bold lines feel both reflective and exuberant, caught up in the joy and beauty of life.

(Note that we've only highlighted the end-stops in the first section here—but they're consistent all through the poem.)

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "face!"
- **Line 2:** "face."
- **Line 3:** "me!"
- **Line 4:** "suppose,"
- **Line 5:** "suppose."

IMAGERY

The poem's imagery brings readers deeper into the speaker's experience of the ferry ride, making them feel as if they really are standing next to him aboard a boat in 19th-century New York, sharing in his delight.

Some of the poem's most striking imagery appears in section 3, where the speaker looks around him at the seagulls, the sky, the water, and the boats on the river. Take a look at this richly visual passage, for instance:

> Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,

> Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water,

These images of light on water help readers to feel the speaker's wide-open, thoughtful, rapturous attention to the day. As he notices the "shimmering track" the sunbeams leave behind them, it's as if they're traveling across the river just like he is. And when he observes the "fine centrifugal spokes of light" radiating out from around the watery reflection of his head, he seems to feel as if he's the hub of a wheel, at the center of the spinning world. That image also suggests that he seems to have a halo—that he feels blessed to be noticing what he's noticing, too!

Imagery helps to paint a picture of the bustling city, too:

> On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night,
> Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.

These images of flaring factory fires might seem almost hellish in another writer's hands. But to this speaker, the sheer energy of that "wild red and yellow light" makes industry seem like just another part of the "curious," fascinating, exciting, and beautiful human experience.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 24:** "Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,"
- **Line 26:** "Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd."
- **Lines 28-35:** "Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies, / Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow, / Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south, / Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water, / Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams, / Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water, / Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward, / Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,"
- **Line 40:** "The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,"
- **Line 42:** "The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,"
- **Line 44:** "The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome crests and glistening,"
- **Line 45:** "The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite storehouses by the docks,"
- **Line 46:** "On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,"
- **Line 47:** "On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night,"
- **Line 48:** "Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets."
- **Line 80:** "Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against me as I sat,"
- **Line 93:** "scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide"
- **Line 94:** "sea-gulls oscillating their bodies"
- **Line 102:** "Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!"
- **Line 103:** "Gorgeous clouds of the sunset!"
- **Line 114:** "fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air"
- **Line 116:** "Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water!"
- **Line 117:** "white-sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters!"
- **Line 119:** "Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!"

REPETITION

Frequent repetitions give the poem emphasis and drama and reflect some of its big ideas.

In the first section, for instance, the speaker uses diacope to suggest the sheer vastness of the crowds around him as he crosses the river on the ferry: there aren't just hundreds of people, but "hundreds and hundreds" of people. The overwhelming size of this crowd is part of what leads him into his reflections on the people not just of the present, but of the future, with another moment of diacope:

> On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
> And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

That repetition sets up a parallel between the people of the speaker's present and his future—all of whom seem to be together in his mind.

A larger-scale repetition happens across the poem, too: the speaker echoes the same descriptive language in sections 3, 8, and 9, returning and returning to the "belated lighter" on its way to shore, the seagulls that "wheel" over the river, the "spokes of light" that surround people's reflections in the water, and the beloved friends who call him by his "nighest name."

Those repetitions fit in with the speaker's philosophy, reflecting his idea that many people across long stretches of time will all enjoy these same sights and experiences.

There's much more repetition to find in this poem: take a look at the anaphora and parallelism entries of this guide for more on those important devices. (And note that we've only highlighted a representative sample here!)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I see you face to face!"
- **Line 2:** "I see you also face to face."
- **Line 4:** "hundreds and hundreds," "than you suppose"
- **Line 5:** "than you might suppose"
- **Line 7:** "myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated"
- **Line 13:** "shore to shore"
- **Line 18:** "A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence,"
- **Line 54:** "between us"
- **Line 55:** "between us"

ANAPHORA

Powerful anaphora helps to give this poem its grandeur. By repeating the same words at the beginning of one line after another, the speaker builds a sweeping vision of human connection.

For instance, take a look at lines 13-16:

> Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
> Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
> Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
> Others will see the islands large and small;

The initial repetitions here draw attention to the speaker's big idea—that generations of "others will" follow him and share his experiences. And they also suggest a kind of continuity: all those repeated words fit right in with the speaker's idea that *people* and *experiences* also repeat over and over.

Something similar happens in lines 22-26:

> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
> Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
> Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
> Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
> Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

Here, again, repeating words describe repeating experiences. Reaching out directly to the people of the future—the readers of this very poem, for instance—the speaker suggests that there's no real difference between those people and he himself. All the lovely sights and feelings he encounters are "the same to me as they are to you," just the same across generations.

(Note that we've only highlighted a few representative moments of anaphora here. There are plenty more to find!)

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "The"
- **Line 7:** "The"
- **Line 8:** "The"
- **Line 10:** "The"
- **Line 11:** "The"
- **Line 12:** "The"
- **Line 13:** "Others will"
- **Line 14:** "Others will"
- **Line 15:** "Others will"
- **Line 16:** "Others will"
- **Line 22:** "Just as"
- **Line 23:** "Just as"
- **Line 24:** "Just as"
- **Line 25:** "Just as"
- **Line 26:** "Just as"

METAPHOR

The speaker's metaphors give readers a sense of his idiosyncratic perspective on the world.

A lot of the speaker's metaphorical language is personification: he imagines everything from the river's "flood-tide" to the "dark" parts of life as a living creature. In his eyes, it's as if the whole world is conscious, as capable of conversation and togetherness as any person.

Elsewhere, the speaker's metaphors are just plain vivid, as when he paints a picture of the mists that roll along the river at sunset as "fleeces tinged with violet"—a metaphor that suggests these clouds are as docile and gentle as sheep. (The imagery of that "violet" tinge completes the peaceful sunset picture.)

And when the speaker imagines his own bad behavior as "the old knot of contrariety," readers get the sense of that "contrariety" (in other words, doing what you know you shouldn't) as a tangled, tight, complicated feeling—a stubborn inner puzzle of the speaker's own making.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses a simile (a subcategory of metaphor) when he describes the "glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings" as he makes his way through the streets and across the river. The idea of lovely sights as

beads on a string seems to structure a lot of what follows: the speaker's way of listing the wonderful things he's seen, one end-stopped line after another, indeed feels a lot like a necklace of experiences.

Across the poem, then, metaphors evoke the beauty and strangeness of the speaker's experiences.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!"
- **Line 2:** "Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face."
- **Line 9:** "The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,"
- **Line 11:** "the ties between me and them,"
- **Line 33:** "fine centrifugal spokes of light"
- **Line 35:** "Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,"
- **Line 62:** "I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,"
- **Lines 65-66:** "It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall, / The dark threw its patches down upon me also,"
- **Line 71:** "I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,"
- **Lines 83-85:** "Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress, / The 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."
- **Line 87:** "I laid in my stores in advance,"
- **Line 126:** "You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism helps to give the end of this poem its impassioned, energetic flavor.

The speaker has already used plenty of parallelism by the time readers hit section 9 of the poem; most of that has been anaphora, lines that start with the same words. (Read more about it in the anaphora entry above, and again note that we've highlighted a representative sample here.)

But in this final stage of the poem, as he exhorts everything around him to keep on doing what it's doing, the language of his parallelism ranges wider:

> Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
> Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
> Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!

All these cries take the same basic form, starting with a lively, commanding verb: "flow," "frolic," "drench." Encouraging the whole world to keep being just the way it is, the speaker also seems to personify everything around him: the very landscape seems to become his friend and collaborator. And more than that, everything seems to be active and on the move, not just passively existing but *doing* something.

The parallelism here at the end of the poem thus gives readers the sense that the speaker's world is full of energetic life. Everything, in his eyes, actively participates in a joyful "eternity" of constant motion.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-12:** "The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day, / The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme, / The similitudes of the past and those of the future, / The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river, / The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away, / The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them, / The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others."
- **Lines 101-121:** "Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide! / Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves! / Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me! / Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers! / Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn! / Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers! / Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution! / Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public assembly! / Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my nighest name! / Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress! / Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it! / Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be looking upon you; / Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current; / Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air; / Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you! / Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water! / Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters! / Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset! / Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses! / Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are, / You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds music and power to some of the poem's vivid moments of description.

For instance, take a look at some of the alliteration in section 3, in which the speaker sees all the sights of the East River:

> Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
> Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,

The harmonious, balanced /h/ and /fl/ sounds here feel like an expression of pure satisfaction, evoking the speaker's sense that all is right with the world as he looks on that "haze" and those "fleeces" of mist. The particular sounds the speaker repeats here are evocative, too: they're soft and gentle, not sharp like a /t/ sound or forceful like a /p/ sound. Read aloud, these lines sound as delicate as the soft mists look and feel.

A few lines later, the alliteration feels sparky and energetic:

> The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls,
> the slender serpentine pennants,
> The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,
> The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,

Here, sibilant /s/ alliteration—suggesting the hiss of waters around the boats and the snap of "pennants" in the wind—gives way to the churning /w/ sounds of the steamboat's paddle. All those /w/ sounds are almost onomatopoeic, letting readers hear the whoosh of the busy river as if they were standing right next to the speaker. (And of course, in the speaker's view, his readers truly are "as good as" standing next to him!)

Alliteration thus helps readers to share the speaker's experiences, both emotional and physical. (Note that we've only marked up alliteration in sections 1 and 3 here to help illustrate how it works: there's plenty more to find in the rest of the poem.)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Flood," "face," "face"
- **Line 2:** "half," "high"
- **Line 3:** "costumes," "curious"
- **Line 4:** "hundreds," "home"
- **Line 5:** "more," "my meditations," "might"
- **Line 29:** "lit," "left"
- **Line 30:** "Saw," "slow," "circles," "south"
- **Line 31:** "Saw," "summer sky"
- **Line 33:** "centrifugal," "spokes," "sunlit"
- **Line 34:** "haze," "hills"
- **Line 35:** "flew," "fleeces"
- **Line 38:** "Saw," "sails," "schooners," "sloops," "saw," "ships"
- **Line 39:** "sailors," "spars"
- **Line 40:** "swinging," "slender serpentine"
- **Line 41:** "small steamers"
- **Line 42:** "white wake," "whirl," "wheels"
- **Line 43:** "flags," "falling"
- **Line 44:** "scallop," "cups," "crests"
- **Line 45:** "growing," "gray," "granite"
- **Line 46:** "barges," "boat," "belated"
- **Line 47:** "fires," "foundry"
- **Line 48:** "Casting," "contrasted," "with," "wild," "clefts"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, helps to give the poem its music and meaning.

Listen to these lines from section 3:

> Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
> Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,

As the speaker gazes on a beautiful sight, he reflects his pleasure with beautiful sounds. The long /oh/ of "floating" and "motionless" moves harmoniously into the /ah/ of "oscillating" and "bodies"; then, the short /ih/ of "glistening" and "lit" meets the short /eh/ of "left" and "rest." Readers might notice that all these sounds travel in pairs: both balanced and changing, they're just like those seagulls, "floating" and "oscillating" at once.

(Note that we've only highlighted a representative sample of assonance in section 3 here: it appears throughout the poem.)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "avails," "place," "avails"
- **Line 21:** "generations," "hence"
- **Line 25:** "hurry," "current," "hurried"
- **Line 26:** "ships," "thick"
- **Line 28:** "floating," "motionless," "oscillating," "bodies"
- **Line 29:** "glistening," "lit," "left," "rest"
- **Line 32:** "my," "eyes"
- **Line 36:** "lower," "notice"
- **Line 38:** "schooners," "sloops," "anchor"
- **Line 39:** "sailors"
- **Line 40:** "slender," "pennants"
- **Line 44:** "waves," "ladled"
- **Line 46:** "hay," "belated"
- **Line 47:** "high," "night"

- **Line 48:** “houses,” “down”

VOCABULARY

Flood-tide (Line 1) - The rising tide.

Costumes (Line 3) - Clothing, styles.

Curious (Line 3, Line 4) - Inspiring curiosity—interesting (and maybe a little amusing).

Hence (Line 5, Line 17, Line 18, Line 21) - Later, in the future.

Meditations (Line 5) - Musings, deep thoughts.

Impalpable sustenance (Line 6) - Almost imperceptible nourishment or support.

The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme (Line 7) - In other words, the elegant construction of existence itself!

Similitudes (Line 8) - Likenesses, similarities.

Avails not (Line 20, Line 56) - Doesn't matter, doesn't make any difference.

Twelfth-month (Line 28) - December.

Oscillating (Line 28, Line 94) - Shimmying, swinging back and forth.

Centrifugal spokes of light (Line 33) - Beams of light radiating out from behind the reflection of the speaker's head, taking the shape of a crown or a halo.

Fleeces (Line 35) - Woolly clouds.

Tinged (Line 35) - Subtly tinted.

Schooners and sloops (Line 38) - Types of boat.

Astride the spars (Line 39) - Straddling the beam of a sailing ship's mast or boom.

Hulls (Line 40) - The main bodies of boats.

Serpentine pennants (Line 40) - Sinuous, snake-like flags.

Pilot-houses (Line 41) - The cabin from which a captain steers a ship.

Wake (Line 42) - The trail a boat leaves in the water.

Tremulous (Line 42) - Trembly or shaky.

Frolicsome crests and glistening (Line 44) - The playful, shining waves.

Foundry (Line 47, Line 119) - A factory that casts metal objects.

Clefts (Line 48) - Splits, divisions.

Stately (Line 50, Line 92) - Grand, dignified, and steady.

Scores (Line 55) - Groups of twenty.

Ample (Line 57, Line 123) - Big, plentiful, or generous.

Bathed (Line 58) - Went swimming.

The float forever held in solution (Line 62) - The feeling of being one part of a single big thing. It's as if the speaker is a particle dissolved into the chemical "solution" of existence.

Meagre (Line 68) - Paltry, hardly worth anything.

Contrariety (Line 71) - Resistance, opposition—perhaps in a sullen or selfish way.

Guile (Line 73) - Trickery, slyness.

Wayward (Line 74) - Out of control, unpredictable.

Malignant (Line 74) - Malicious, malevolent.

Wanting (Line 75, Line 76, Line 77) - Lacking. If a quality is "not wanting" in the speaker, he's got plenty of it!

Haps (Line 78) - Happenings, events.

Nighest name (Line 79, Line 95, Line 109) - Closest or most intimate name—in other words, the speaker's first name or nickname.

Negligent (Line 80) - Careless, inattentive.

Laid in my stores in advance (Line 87) - In other words, the speaker stored up plenty of thoughts of the people of the future.

Ministers (Line 126) - People (or in this case, things!) in charge of caring for or tending something.

Insatiate henceforward (Line 127) - Eagerly hungry, from now on.

Fathom (Line 130) - Understand.

Furnish (Line 131, Line 132) - Provide or offer.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is broken into nine sections of all different lengths, each of which looks at the speaker's big ideas about humanity, time, and transcendence from a slightly different angle.

Some of those sections are broken into multiple stanzas (as in section 1) and some are just one continuous stanza themselves.

Whitman liked (and invented!) this form, and used it often—see "I Sing the Body Electric" for another good example. A meandering, unlimited free-verse structure allowed him to explore his grand ideas unhampered by traditional poetic conventions like stanza length, meter, or rhyme. It also allowed him to make a characteristic movement between sweeping passages of description and short, punchy declarations—showing his mind at work as he develops his transcendental philosophy from his experience of everyday life.

METER

Like a lot of Whitman's poetry, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is

written in free verse. That means it doesn't use a regular meter (or a rhyme scheme, for that matter). Instead, the speaker can use as many syllables as he likes in as irregular a pattern as he likes to communicate his vision.

The lack of a standard meter, however, doesn't mean the speaker doesn't use rhythm to powerful effect. For instance, take a look at the way he shapes these important lines in the poem's third section:

> 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,
> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, ||
> so I felt,
> Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, || I was one
> of a crowd,

It's not a regular meter, but caesura and parallelism that shape the rhythms of this passage. The speaker's mid-line breaks give these lines their stately, unhurried, swinging pace, and set off his repetitions, centering his big idea: that the people of the past, present, and future are all mysteriously connected.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. Instead, the poem gets its music from intense repetitions and sonic effects like alliteration, assonance, and sibilance.

For instance, take a look at the way the speaker uses anaphora, assonance, and alliteration in lines 33-36 in the poem's third section:

> Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round
> the shape of my head in the sunlit water,
> Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-
> westward,
> Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with
> violet,
> Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels
> arriving,

Here, the repetition of the word "look'd" gives this passage its resounding, powerful sound: it's like a bell tolling. And within the lines, assonant /i/ and /oh/ sounds and alliterative /h/ and /fl/ sounds create moments of harmonious music that evoke the speaker's pleasure in what he sees.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is pretty likely to be Walt Whitman himself. Much of Whitman's poetry is written in his own distinctive first-person voice, and the speaker's life experiences match Whitman's own: Whitman, too, lived in Brooklyn for many years.

If this speaker isn't Whitman, he's certainly Whitmanesque: a passionate, emotive person with a knack for seeing the everyday world in cosmic terms. Making an everyday journey across the East River, this speaker is blown away by his feelings of connection to the people of both the past and the future. The "distance" between the living, the dead, and the not-yet-born doesn't matter a bit: to him, all of humanity takes part in a mystical connection that transcends time and space.

The thought gives him profound joy and consolation. In this speaker's eyes, no one is really alone.

SETTING

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is set, as its title suggests, on the ferry across the East River that travels between Manhattan and Brooklyn. And while this poem's action takes place in Whitman's own time—the mid-19th century—part of the speaker's point is that the things he sees and feels transcend his own time and place. The people of New York will keep seeing these same sights and feeling these same feelings for years after his own death.

The setting here is thus at once specific (noting Brooklyn's "ample hills" and the boats gathered in the harbors of Manhattan) and transcendent. The speaker might be looking at this lively city scene in his own time, but he also feels connected to the people of the past and the future who have stood—and will stand—in exactly the same spot, feeling the same feelings.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is often considered the quintessential American poet. His stylistic innovations, mystical vision of the world, and righteous outrage against injustice mark him out as a writer unlike any other in his time.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" first appeared in the 1856 edition of Whitman's magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman would revisit both this poem and the collection as a whole many times over the course of his life. *Leaves of Grass* went through five substantial revisions (and a few reissues), and what started as a slim collection of twelve poems became a sprawling tome full of hundreds of works, charting Whitman's long life and philosophical maturation.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a great example of Whitman's characteristic style: most of his poems used this same dramatic, declarative first-person voice. Whitman was a pioneer of free verse, writing without rhyme or meter during a time when most English-language poetry was pretty formally rigorous. His ideas

were also ahead of their time. Like his friends and colleagues Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman saw the divine in the everyday world around him (and especially in nature), and his passion for the American landscape would be an inspiration to later environmentalists.

A much-beloved poet, Whitman has had a deep and enduring influence on many writers who have followed him, from Allen Ginsberg to Ezra Pound to Joyce Harjo.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Whitman first wrote "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the U.S. was on the verge of descending into civil war. One ominous harbinger of that long and bloody conflict was the Bleeding Kansas incident, which occurred in 1856, the very year that Whitman wrote the first draft of this poem. In this series of violent clashes, settlers fought over whether the Kansas territory would enter the Union as a slave state or a free state. Such conflicts over slavery would eventually split the North and South apart and set the country at war against itself.

A fervent believer in universal human connectedness, Whitman was staunchly anti-slavery and pacifistic. He never went to war himself, but saw plenty of wartime misery as a volunteer nurse and a horrified onlooker at slave markets. His experiences of those atrocities (and his post-war grief over Abraham Lincoln, whom he deeply admired) would inspire some of his most famous poems.

And while Whitman sometimes despaired over humanity's way of making the same terrible mistakes over and over, he was also ultimately optimistic about the beauty and worth of existence. The hopeful vision of connectedness in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" speaks to his persistent faith in human fellowship.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Whitman's Style — Read an appreciation of Whitman's distinctive style, and learn more about his influences. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/dec/10/poemoftheweek20)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Whitman's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman)
- An Early Edition — Visit the Whitman Archive to see images of the poem from the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass. (https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1860/poems/122)
- The Poem Aloud — Watch a 2019 collaborative performance of the poem by Brooklynites, made in honor of Whitman's 200th birthday. (And note the folks wearing "Ample Hills" shirts: a famous Brooklyn ice cream parlor is named after a line in this poem!) (https://youtu.be/kP-46qLeKm4)
- Whitman's Legacy — Listen to the poets Allen Ginsberg, Sharon Olds, and Galway Kinnell talking about Whitman's influence on their work in this 1992 conversation. (https://youtu.be/2M5O3_FYB4A)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- A Noiseless Patient Spider
- Beat! Beat! Drums!
- I Hear America Singing
- I Sing the Body Electric
- O Captain! My Captain!
- O Me! O Life!
- The Voice of the Rain
- When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer
- When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

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