

talk
to
me!

LET'S TALK EMPOWERMENT. LET'S TALK ENGLISH

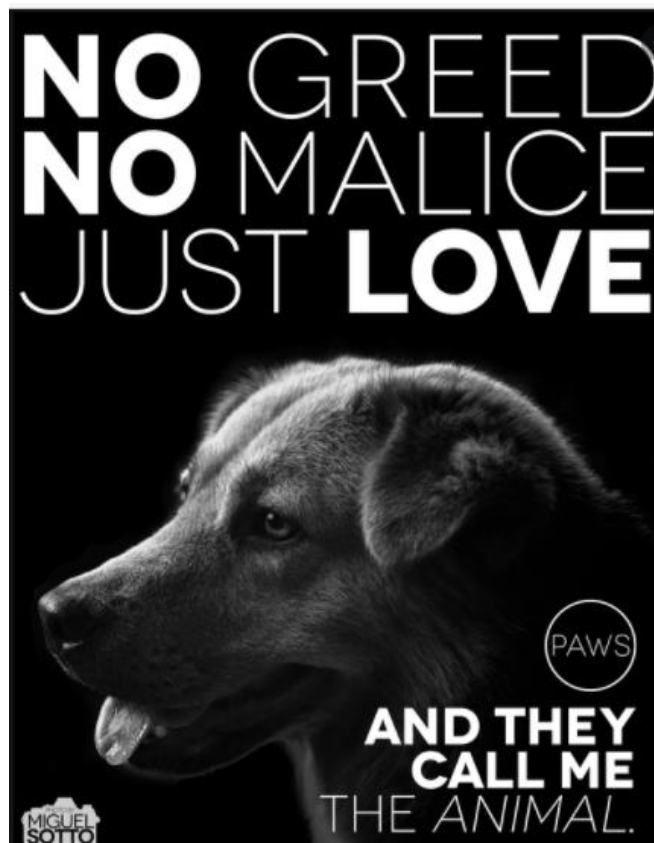
First Flight

Animals

1. Background

Walt Whitman was an American revolutionary poet who wrote in free verse. This means that there is no rhyming in his poetry. He is considered the father of free verse (although he was not the first poet to use it), the father of modern poetry, and, according to one critic, the "imaginative father and mother" of every American, whether a poet or not.

The poem 'Animals' is an excerpt from his much longer poem, "**Song of Myself**". This poem is included in his work, "Leaves of Grass". "Song of Myself" has been said to represent the core of Whitman's poetic vision.



2. Summary

Whitman wants to turn back in time, to a point where humans lived with animals, and as simply as animals. He looks 'long and long' at the lives and virtues of animals, and yearns to be like them.

He highlights the difference between animals and humans. Animals are calm, content and complete in themselves; they do not need any material possessions to be happy. Their real nature is to be happy. They are free of the guilt or hypocrisy that religion imposes on us. They feel no need to kneel before, or surrender their free will to Gods. Humans have lost the sense of unity and equality that comes naturally to animals.

Whitman is attracted to animals because they remind him of values and virtues that humans once possessed, but have thoughtlessly left behind. They have adopted the modern way of life, with all its complexity, greed, and pressures. Animals remind him of our real nature, of what it means to be human. He accepts these reminders, and wants to go back into the past way of life.

To watch a virtual movie of Walt Whitman reciting this poem click on the link below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnlyJW3GSJ4>

3. Detailed Explanation

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are
so placid and self-contain'd
I stand and look at them long and long.*

Whitman expresses his desire to turn his life away from the company of humans, and live with animals because they are so calm and self sufficient. They are not dependent on external objects for their happiness. He looks at them for a long, long time, implying that he too yearns for the simplicity of their lives.

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,*

The poet contrasts the nature of animals with that of humans. Animals do not complain about their condition like humans do. They sleep peacefully; since they have not committed any sins, they do not feel the need to repent. Thus there is no hypocrisy in their lives; they are not self righteous, so they do not talk about their duty to God.

Whitman implies that human behavior is just the opposite. It is full of contradictions. Humans work very hard, and then they complain about their lives. They can't sleep at night because they feel guilty about having sinned. Despite these sins, they talk about their duty to God. Humans are therefore hypocritical.

*Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with
the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that
lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

Animals are completely satisfied with their lives; they are not driven by the intense desire to own or possess more and more material objects. Animals do not have to kneel or bow before anyone of their own kind, or in front of their Gods or ancestors, because they consider everyone to be equal. This is a message of unity. As a result of all of these virtues, no animal is unhappy. The implication here, again, is that humans are just the opposite: they are dissatisfied, greedy, and do not treat each other as equals. Therefore, they are unhappy.

*So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince
them plainly in their possession
I wonder where they get those tokens,
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?*

The last stanza is deeply philosophical. The poet longs for the past way of life, when human beings had stronger values. He feels deeply connected to animals, because they still possess values and virtues that humans once had. Unfortunately, human beings got swept away by greed, and did not

even realize that they were leaving behind their basic humanity. This greed unfortunately is a part of modern civilization.

Here is an interesting quote from Gandhiji which is very relevant to this situation:

When a reporter asked him what he thought of Western civilization, Gandhiji replied: "I think it would be a good idea." He was making fun at the very idea that the West could be called civilized. Western civilization, for him didn't even exist! Yet, he said, it would be a good idea to have a civilization in the future. He was criticizing the capitalist, materialistic lifestyles and values of the West which we, in India, now follow mindlessly! We have forgotten our own ancient culture and its deep values.

4. Vocabulary

1. **Placid** – not easily upset or excited
Cows are very **placid** animals.
2. **Self-contained** – someone who is complete in himself or herself and is not dependent on anyone or anything
He is a **self-contained** man who lives alone very happily.
3. **Whine** – a long, high-pitched complaining cry
Atul is never happy; he always finds something to **whine** about.
4. **Condition** – the particular state that something or someone is in
Even though the car is old, it is in perfect **condition**.
5. **Dissatisfied** – not pleased with something; feeling that something is not as good as should be
The Principal was **dissatisfied** with the students' results in the Higher Secondary Examination.
6. **Demented** – mad
He was **demented** with worry when his dog got lost.
7. **Mania** – an excessive enthusiasm or desire; an obsession.
Football World Cup **mania** is sweeping the entire country.

8. **Respectable** – considered to be socially acceptable because of your good character, appearance, or behaviour
She is a **respectable** young woman from a good family.
9. **Token** – a thing or action which is small or unimportant but which shows intent; a small metal or plastic disc that can be exchanged for goods or services, or as a special offer
The management fired all the workers who went on a **token** strike.
Take my **token** for the Number 10 bus service.
10. **Evince** – show
Our teachers are happy when we **evince** interest in our studies.
11. **Possession** – the fact that you have or own something
I have in my **possession**, the book that you have been searching for so long.
12. **Negligently** – carelessly, thoughtlessly
He was driving **negligently** and crashed into a street light.

5. Questions

Thinking about the Poem

1. Notice the use of the word 'turn' in the first line, "I think I could turn and live with animals..." What is the poet turning from?
2. Mention three things that humans do and animals don't.
3. Do humans kneel to other humans who lived thousands of years ago? Discuss this in groups.
4. What are the 'tokens' that the poet says he may have dropped long ago, and which the animals have kept for him? Discuss this in class. (Hint: Whitman belongs to the Romantic tradition that includes Rousseau and Wordsworth, which holds that civilisation has made humans false to their own true nature. What could be the basic aspects of our nature as living beings that humans choose to ignore or deny?)

6. Literary Devices

1. **Rhyming scheme:** There is no rhyming scheme. The poem is in free verse.
2. **Alliteration:** This is the repetition of a consonant sound at the start of two or more closely placed words.

I wonder where they get those tokens – the 'w' sound is repeated.

3. **Assonance:** It is repetition of vowel sounds in same line.

I think I could turn and live with animals – the vowel sound 'i' is repeated.

4. **Repetition:** The word 'long' has been repeated.

*I stand and look at them **long** and **long***

5. **Anaphora:** the repetition of a word or expression at the start of two or more consecutive lines

- (i) 'I' used at the start of two consecutive lines

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are
so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.*

- (ii) 'They do not' repeated at the start of three consecutive lines

***They do not** sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,*

- (iii) 'Not one' is repeated at the start of three consecutive lines

Not one *is dissatisfied, not one is demented with
the mania of owning things,
Not one* *kneels to another, nor to his kind that
lived thousands of years ago,
Not one* *is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

6. Metaphor:

- (i) 'Sweat' and 'whine' refer to the cries and complaints of human beings
- (ii) 'Tokens' are a metaphor for inner qualities of human beings such as virtues and values.

English is funny, because...

If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth beeth?