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Whitman’s Take on the Soul’s Search for Meaning

Walt Whitman, as a partaker in the 19th century American ideals, recognizes that the world is not purely the concrete, but also the abstract. His recognition comes in his poem, “A Noiseless Patient Spider”, in which he contemplates the human soul and its search for purpose. “A Noiseless Patient Spider” exemplifies the idea that within one’s search for meaning, ever still comes great difficulty. As a soul’s search for purpose is an individualistic endeavor, it is often an act of extreme independence, but yet, an isolative endeavor. This search for meaning feels alone to one, desperate for a purpose. As Walt Whitman puts it, it is like throwing a thread, and hoping it will “catch somewhere” (10). In “A Noiseless Patient Spider”, Whitman reflects on the struggle of finding a purpose to fulfill one’s soul. However, this subject matter can be a difficult one to describe as it is speaking on the abstract: the soul. So, Whitman employs a non-abstract element in order to discuss this. He utilizes a spider as a metaphor in order to describe the experience of the human soul. By employing this metaphor, Whitman is able to take the abstract and connect it to a concrete example in order to clarify the overarching theme. This theme is that the human soul naturally engages in a search for meaning and purpose, however, within this search comes great difficulty, as it can be an isolating and lonely one. This concept is then presented and amplified in Whitman’s characterization of the spider as the metaphorical representation of the soul. A noiseless patient spider exemplifies the difficulties in a human soul’s search for meaning by utilizing a spider as a metaphor for the soul, which is shown in the diction that is both illustrative in action, as well as forlorn, yet resilient, in order to emphasize the negative feelings that come with this search, and amplify the necessity for perseverance.

In “A Noiseless Patient Spider”, Whitman utilizes forlorn and illustrative diction in order to strengthen the metaphorical connection between the spider and the soul. He utilizes the spider and its characterization in order to exemplify the attributes to the human soul, and the difficulties surrounding it. In order to develop the characterization, the author puts forth both forlorn and illustrative diction. In other words, diction that is emphasizing feelings of lonesomeness or diction that is verbiage that is illustrating the actions and endeavors of the character. Through both forms of diction, Whitman strengthens the characterization of the spider, and thus accentuates the metaphor between the spider and the human soul.

In order to highlight the experience of the human soul, Whitman utilizes forlorn diction, in order to emphasize the isolative and lonely feelings that come about when a soul is in search for meaning, that is thus represented in the spider. This forlorn diction is present in characterizations of the spider as a means to relate to the experience of the soul. The author depicts the spider, which is portrayed in the first stanza, as “noiseless patient…on a little promontory” (1-2). This description shows the characterization of the spider to be forlorn, lonely, and secluded, as exemplified in the author’s word choice. The author describes the spider as on a ‘promontory’. This placement of the spider indicates that it is alone and isolated. It is alone on a single peak, surrounded, perhaps, by water, or land. The use of the word promontory suggests that the spider is in complete isolation, with no nearness to others. It is not just in seclusion, still nearby others, but rather is in complete isolation. The forlorn diction present in the word choice of ‘promontory’ shows that the spider is in fact in *complete* isolation, and therefore has the potentiality for loneliness. The spider is also described as ‘noiseless’, which denotes that it is in introversion and alone, as it is not communicating with

another. The word choice of noiseless emphasizes the spider’s existence as being alone, and singular. It is also ‘patient’ however, as it is waiting in its isolation, which denotes that it is persistent. This forlorn yet persevering diction, creates a stronger characterization of the spider, and thus leads to a better understanding of the soul, as the spider functions as a metaphor for the soul.

Use of the spider as a metaphor for the soul becomes apparent as the soul is described in similar context to the spider. The soul, in parallel to the spider is also described in terms of isolation and being alone. The soul is “detached, in measureless oceans of space” (7) This line is exemplifying the fact that the soul, similar to the spider, is also in complete isolation. This expression of isolation is expanding on the concept that just as the spider is alone in isolation, others also have the potentiality for loneliness in isolation. This potentiality would make sense in context of the soul as, one could imagine, in one’s search for meaning as it is a very inherently individualistic journey. When functioning with independence on finding oneself, it is apparent that they would remain ‘detached’, as they attempt to find their own meaning. So, this isolative journey that the soul faces parallels the spider’s physical isolation on its promontory. By creating a physical image of isolation and loneliness with forlorn diction in context to the spider, the author is exemplifying how not only the spider can lay victim to seclusion and loneliness, but also the soul. This connection exemplifies the soul’s tendencies (through the metaphor of the spider) to experience struggles during its search for meaning, but within this, with his diction, characterization, and metaphor, Whitman emphasizes the importance of perseverance.

The parallel to the soul’s experience of struggle is also seen as the poem utilizes diction that is not only forlorn, but also illustrative in action, in order to emphasize the metaphorical connection between the spider and the soul’s fervency in their searches. The diction that is illustrative in action is present as the author utilizes action words to indicate the characterization of the spider as a persistent creature, desperate to cling onto anything in the midst of its loneliness (already established through the use of forlorn diction). Whitman describes the spider as “tirelessly, speeding” (5). The diction of this description is illustrative in action, or in other words is verbiage that describes movements and thus relates to characterization. This type of diction, word choice that is illustrative in action, reveals how the spider can be characterized. The diction does so by using the word ‘tirelessly’ which implies that the spider is determined, as it is pushing itself to productivity, whether with or without prevail, despite its fatigue. However, the verbiage of ‘speeding’ indicates that the spider is also *fervently* attempting something*.* The word choice of speeding denotes that the spider is going at this attempt with great urgency. So, in combination with these two ideas, the spider can be characterized as having a strong desire to fulfill something, yet functioning with a meticulous perseverance to do so, despite not yet succeeding. Through word choice that is illustrative in action, such as ‘tirelessly’, and ‘speeding’, the poem is able to show the actions of the spider in order to show its feelings of incessant desire, which further develops its characterization as someone pining for a fulfillment of purpose. This characterization can then be connected to the human soul, present in the second stanza, who is also in search for purpose.

Whilst the soul is on the search for purpose, it is paralleled in the characterization of the spider as a being on a forlorn and fervent endeavor. Similarly, to the spider, the soul is also on

its own persistent endeavor. The soul is described in the second stanza as “ceaselessly musing” (8). This description denotes that the soul is determinedly searching. That signifies that the soul is in a strikingly similar position to the spider. Thus, the spider, characterized in the prior stanza, is being utilized as a metaphor for the author’s explanation of the soul. Just as the spider is searching with fervency to attach to something, so is the soul in its journey to find meaning. So, the metaphor accomplishes a greater understanding of this connection between the two. As the spider is a concrete subject, and it is doing concrete actions, as portrayed through the illustrative diction, it allows the reader to have a simpler understanding of both the logistics and difficulties of the soul’s search. This metaphorical connection from the concrete to non-physical is essential in the reader’s understanding as it gives physical attributes to the non-concrete, and thus creates a clearer understanding of the central theme of recognition of the struggles in the human soul’s searching for meaning.

The soul’s search for meaning is depicted in a way that creates a greater understanding of the difficulties this endeavor entails. Whitman’s description of this search is depicted in a metaphor, that makes a reflection on this subject matter easier to understand, and therefore even more insightful and significant. Whitman employs the use of a metaphorical spider in parallel to the human soul. This metaphor of course then is dependent on the characterization of the spider. The characterization of the spider is accurately depicted then through Whitman’s diction, which can be classified as both forlorn and illustrative in action. With all this in conjunction, Whitman then creates an accurate representation of a common human struggle: finding meaning. With his use of the concrete to describe the abstract (the soul), Whitman accurately depicts the universal search for meaning and how it feels to be in the midst of that

with great struggle, fervency, and lonesomeness. Within this, Whitman appeals to the American people, in the midst of the 19th century, as they struggle to adhere to the ever increasingly individualistic society, whilst compensating for their own growth in spirituality and desires to find purpose amongst this.