

5-1-1999

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## Recommended Citation

Hammerich, Jenna, "Social Contact versus Isolation in 'Song of Myself' and 'A Noiseless Patient Spider'" (1999). *First-Year Writing Contest*.

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Social Contact versus Isolation In "Song of Myself" and "A Noiseless Patient Spider"

Common sense and fundamental sociology both assert that human beings require social interaction. It has been proven that people socialized beginning at a very young age develop stronger personalities and more virile, receptive minds than those who are not provided with more or less constant interaction. In addition to needing extensive social contact to emotionally develop correctly, people also desire it in much the same way they desire sleep. Those who do not desire such social interaction are negatively termed "outsiders" or "loners," suggesting that as a society, we value and recognize thorough socialization as right and normal. However, freedom, the concept most central to the American way of life, suggests that as Americans, we value individualism over conformity. So in the very nature of American society we find a contradiction—do we interact and conform even though we may lose our individualities?

Walt Whitman, the so-called "American Bard," examines just what it means to stand apart from and then involve one's self in the ever combining, restless American civilization. Whitman takes the stance that most Americans do, however unconscious of it they may be: He values the individual over the whole, but emphasizes the general idea of wholeness rather than focusing on the importance of social interaction. Many of his poems revolve around the concept of being an outsider versus being part of the elaborate social structure. This is especially true of "Song of Myself" and "A Noiseless

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Patient Spider." In each poem, it is obvious how comfortable he is with his solitude, but at the same time, it is clear that he wants to feel like a part of the whole.

Whitman provides an intense analysis of what it means to be Walt Whitman, the human being, in his poem, "Song of Myself," which introduces his complete book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*. "Song of Myself" celebrates wholeness as well as individuality, social contact as well as isolation. The respective concepts of social contact and isolation are contradictory, and yet he emphasizes both in his poetry. The reader must decide which position Whitman takes by carefully interpreting each of the 52 sections in "Song of Myself." Sometimes the narrator seems to be so captivated by his own person that he unconsciously neglects other people. Other times, in his quest to experience the wholeness of living, he deeply involves himself in their lives. And so he vacillates between standing apart from them and standing with them.

In another Whitman poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," the reader again must examine scrupulously the contrasting ideas present because the author is rather ambiguous when it comes to favoring one opinion—remaining detached or becoming involved—over the other. Once more, Whitman seems to be promoting individuality as well as social interaction. However, he leans a little bit more toward social contact since he infers that people must create their own surroundings and personal connections in order to become whole (Lewis 115).

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First, I will examine "A Noiseless Patient Spider" in the context that it places greater emphasis on isolation rather than contact. "I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated, Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding" (3). These first lines place the noiseless patient spider up high on a precipice, surveying the land that stretches before it. The spider seems to be considering its options while observing and studying the landscape. It will not be rushed into anything. It will remain on the precipice until it is sure it is ready to make a decision. The decision may be to create its own environment (its web), or in the case of a soul, its own social sphere. Like Whitman himself, the spider seems to revel in being detached.

This poem is interpreted much more easily when we consider that the spider is no longer content to sit and watch. It wants and needs to connect with something larger than itself. The noiseless patient spider finally begins to spin its web "out of itself", "ever tirelessly" (4- 5), indicating that it is making the effort to establish social ties. However, in order for any web to be formed, it must be anchored to something. Whitman is suggesting that there must be a basis for a relationship between two people and that the second person is a necessity— one solitary person cannot make the decision to make a friend and say he has done it. A second party is required. The spider needs its web to feel at home, comfortable, and right. People need other people to feel this same way.

The symbolism in this poem rests on the meaning of "bridge," the significance of the "ductile anchor," and the concept of the "gossamer thread" that must "catch somewhere."

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And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
    Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to  
    connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,  
    Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul. (6-10).

As these lines indicate, Whitman makes the connection between the spider and his soul. Both stand alone, observing everything and everyone else, waiting patiently to make the right move or decision. The soul in the second stanza searches continuously for something to attach itself to, as the spider seeks something to which it can affix its web. The soul is actively, almost desperately seeking something to live for, something that will interest and provoke it, a desire so strong that it encompasses the soul to the point of obsession. Most likely, this something is not a something at all. It is a someone.

And so we are back to Walt Whitman's fixation on the issue of social contact. The spider had all the time and opportunity in the world, standing there on its little promontory. It was alone, and content with its isolation. Keep in mind that content does not mean happy, it merely indicates comfort with one's self. But people cannot and will not function in a society of isolated selves. They need to interact—they want to interact. Contentedness is only a means to the happiness that is found in friendships.

A relationship is exactly what Whitman is getting at when he mentions the "bridge" (9). The "anchor" Whitman mentions refers to the act of forming the relationship (9). The entire poem suggests that social contact is natural and necessary for happiness, although it may be unnecessary for survival.

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R.W.B. Lewis, a Whitman analyst, takes a slightly different view. He claims the poem suggests that each person needs to create his own world according to his wants and needs, or else risk being deprived of character (115). This assessment fails to fully acknowledge the plea for social interaction that is evident in "A Noiseless Patient Spider." It does, however, identify the need for people to construct their realities, which does include relationships and other social connections.

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" emphasizes how a person can be content while alone but will remain unfulfilled and somewhat unhappy until he/she becomes involved with other people. This notion is analogous to a culinary one: A single person with no social connections is like a bottle of vanilla extract—while it is a whole entity in itself, it cannot realize its potential (be happy) without being mixed with other ingredients (people).

"Song of Myself" also identifies the temptation people encounter that entices them to socially interact while recognizing the peace and wholeness found in one's self. The poem is what Whitman scholar Edwin Miller observes as "the reverie of the outsider, the isolate, the perennial American protestant, who struggles to reassert the collective dream, only to end, . . . in a retreat into the self" (86). Critic Richard Chase comments that the poem retains the theme of "the identification of the self with other selves, often highly incongruous ones, followed by the extrication of the self from its momentarily assumed identity" (20). In other words, Chase is confirming Walt Whitman's oscillation between his preference for solitude or social intercourse. Whitman will often identify or connect with certain people, but immediately afterwards, we may find him disjointed, claiming, "Apart from the pulling and

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hauling stands what I am. . . Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it" (4. 75-79). He identifies with many different people and puts himself in their positions. Then, in section 38, he unexpectedly jerks himself out of this state and proclaims, "Enough! enough! enough! Somehow I have been stunn'd. Stand back!" (38. 1-2) His isolation seems to please him in setting him apart from the masses, even though he goes to great measures to celebrate the other people as well. His fascination with his own self, his individuality, and his isolation obstructs the love that he would like to feel toward his fellow man (Black 94). We can tell that he craves to become involved, at least occasionally, in people's affairs by looking at many different sections in the poem. Section 10, for example, has Whitman nurse, keep, and feed a runaway slave for a night, and section 40 (lines 1011-1013) sees him throw himself upon a dying man in an attempt to support him.

It is clear throughout "Song of Myself" that Walt Whitman desires to simply be connected to the rest of the human race. He is constantly describing different types of people and their circumstances and actions. This is most evident in section 15, in which he dedicates 66 lines to his observations of natural American behavior found in different classes, genders, ethnic groups, ages, and occupations. The passage ends with the lines: "And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,/ And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,/ And of these one and all I weave the song of myself" (326-328). Walt Whitman is claiming that he is one with the people. Further, he believes that every person contributes to forming Whitman's identity even though they do not realize it. He finds himself reflected in every man, woman, child, and animal. We can examine sections of the poem in which he attempts

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to become whole by engaging in social interaction. Of course, one must recognize that the entire poem celebrates his completeness in and of himself, but also that to discover more about himself and to become whole with his entire environment, he needs to throw himself into the batter of mankind and mix it up. If he does not, certain aspects of his own personality—those that thrive on social contact—will not be revealed. This would be unacceptable, considering the poem's aim is to identify each part of Walt Whitman and how they function together with their surroundings, to become one complete man. Everyone he comes in contact with helps him to become more aware of who he is.

Although he never adopts a negative attitude towards people, he does insinuate that they have faults enough for him to want to go live with the animals. He observes:

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.

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 . . . (32. 1-5)

If these qualities are inherent in people and not animals, then why does he not find them in himself? In the opening lines, he explicitly states "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1.3). This contradicts the assertions he makes about human nature in section 32 because in one instance, he is saying, "I am You," and in another he claims "You have faults that I don't; therefore, I am superior and shall go live among the animals." Whitman often comes across as having a divine perception of himself. Take line 212, for instance: "An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies." He seems almost ethereal in the way that he watches over the people, like a god would.



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So does the poem advocate solitude over social contact? While each part of society seems to be at work within the author, he often removes himself and stands above everyone, complacently observing the masses. Perhaps the section that best illustrates this act is 11, which concerns 28 young men. In the section, a lonely and wealthy woman hides in her room watching these young men bathing. She observes them in secret and loves them. The narrator addresses her: "You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room," (11. 9) meaning that she is with the bathers in spirit but physically remains inside. She vicariously experiences the men's merriment and feels like a part of them. The woman represented is Walt Whitman, and the bathers are the American people. He watches and loves all of them, but they do not realize it. While the woman remains inside her house, Whitman looks upon the people from his house—his body and mind. He "[splashes] in the water" by occasionally physically interacting with people and by spiritually identifying with them. And yet he "stays in his room" by never associating with anyone for too long: He observes and interacts with people very carefully, never sacrificing his own individuality.

The beginning of "Song of Myself" has Whitman standing apart, expectantly watching. In section eight, he observes many people in different walks of life, from a baby to lovers to someone committing suicide. Later in the poem, though, he tries to put himself in the place of many of the people he has been observing: He is once fascinated and awed by a runaway slave that he takes him in. Later, he identifies with a slave, declaring "I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs, Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen. . ." (33. 838-839) Section 33 is entirely Whitman's identification with

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the people he had formerly "kept at a distance." However, with each new person he identifies with, he experiences that person's anguish and sadness—every hardship each individual experiences, Walt Whitman experiences (Black 91-96). He wants to merge himself with the lives of the people, but again the closeness is almost too much for him. He even says, "To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand" (27. 618).

"Song of Myself" highlights wholeness in all its aspects—wholeness within the self (individuality) and wholeness with regard to the environment and other people. As in "A Noiseless Patient Spider," the importance and profundity of social interaction as a necessary activity is stressed. Walt Whitman clearly, without hesitation, presents the need for this in "A Noiseless Patient Spider." He compares his soul to the spider, which reaches out and spins its social web. In "Song of Myself," on the other hand, he is more ambiguous. He recognizes the fact that his soul yearns for social contact, but he finds himself overwhelmed at times and must step back. Clearly, he values his independence and even takes comfort in his isolation. But in order to feel complete, he cannot remain this way. Social interaction is necessary to the development of an identity. It is not only a scientific fact but also outright common sense.

As we leave Walt Whitman, we will consider what are probably the most direct and sincere words: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself" (51.1324-1325). He loves his solitude as much as he does his fellow man. The two previously interpreted poems convey this contradiction and finally lead us to conclude that wholeness is achieved through personal exploration as well as one's interaction with others. Find yourself on your own, and then find yourself in others.