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English 301: Roadcap

Major Essay #3: Poetry

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1649 (1291 w/o quotes)

### Men Are Not Trees

In Walt Whitman's poem "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" a message of companionship is presented. The speaker in the poem is comparing himself to the oak tree and he finds that he is both similar and different in the comparison. The overall theme of the poem can be summarized by a comparison between Nature and Man. [Thesis] A tree can grow alone, but a man needs his friends.

The oak tree is described as a "live-oak growing" (line 1). It is one thing that the tree is live, but it is another thing that it is growing. According to the Oxford English Dictionary "to grow" is defined as "to manifest vigorous life; to put forth foliage, flourish, be green. To increase gradually in magnitude, quantity, or degree" ("grow, *v.*" def. 1a, 7a). The oak tree is not just simply alive, it is very much alive. The live-oak tree is growing; it is taking in everything that it can from both the sun and the earth and it is increasing. It is producing life. The speaker says three times throughout the poem that it is "uttering joyous leaves" (3, 5, and 13). A "leaf" is defined as "an expanded organ of a plant springing from its root" ("leaf, *n.*" def. 1a). The oak tree is expanding itself. It is growing upwards and outwards. The production of leaves is a sign that the oak tree healthy and prospering. The speaker also describes the oak tree as "lusty" (4). Lusty is defined as (when referring to people and animals) "healthy, strong, vigorous" ("lusty, *a.*" def. 5a). In earlier uses it was defined as "Strong, powerful, massively built, hence, corpulent,

stout, fat” (“lusty, *a.*” def. 7a, 10a). The oak tree is sufficiently described as something that is taking advantage of life and living to the fullest. It is expanding, healthy, strong, increasing, and flourishing; it is a live-oak that is growing.

From the very beginning of the poem, the speaker starts his comparison with the oak tree. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the words “rude, lusty” are most commonly used to describe people and animals. However, the description works very well for a poem. The speaker is describing the oak tree using definitions that were originally used for non-plant description and hence, perhaps intentionally, the speaker of the poem begins revealing his comparison between the oak tree and himself. The tree is lusty; it is healthy, strong, and vigorous; something that is very common for people and especially for young men. The tree is rude; it is “uneducated, unlearned, ignorant, and inexperienced” (“rude, *a.*” def. 1a, 1b, 2a). The word “rude” is a very common description for people, whether it is used as a noun, adjective, or adverb. An oak tree is almost never described as a “rude” tree, because the word “rude” is commonly associated with people and serves as a bad choice for the description of a tree. The tree was also described as unbending; it is “unyielding, steady, and does not give way” (“unbending, *ppl. a.*” def. 1a). This is a good description for the stubbornness of people. It does especially well in describing the stubbornness of young men. At the end of the line the speaker says that the oak tree “made me think of myself” (4). Here, the speaker makes a clear-cut connection between the live-oak tree and himself. At one time or another he shared similar traits with the oak tree; he probably shared the vigor and steadiness that the oak tree has, or he shared the same vitality and growth that the tree is currently demonstrating.

However, in the following line the speaker points out an important difference between the oak tree and himself, “But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves, standing alone there,

without its / friend, its lover near--for I knew I could not" (5-6). The strongest theme in the poem comes from these two lines. The tree shared common traits with mankind, but the difference lay in isolation. The tree was rude, unbending, and lusty, but it was all that by itself. It was practically alone on the "wide flat place", yet it still flourished (12). The oak tree could grow and increase despite being isolated, despite lacking other trees around it, and despite being the only one of its kind in a deserted place. People, on the other hand, are incapable of "uttering joyous leaves" when they are alone (3, 5, and 13). The author says "for I knew I could not" (6). If a man was to be isolated from his friend or from his lover, then he would be unable to grow like a lusty oak tree. Without interaction and the companionship of another human person the speaker knew that he could not flourish; he could not grow. There would be no "joyous" leaves. There would be sorrow and depression instead.

The speaker says, "Without any companion it grew there" (3). A "companion" is defined as "one who associates with or accompanies another; a mate; a fellow; a person who lives with another in need of society" ("companion, *n.*" def. 1a, 7a). The oak tree was growing without a companion. This means, in other words, that the oak tree did not require a companion. The tree was perfectly fine by itself, all alone, without any society. However, for people it is different. The speaker knew that he required a companion. He needed society. Otherwise he would be unable to utter "joyous" leaves. The speaker right away identified his dependence on human interaction; his dependence for friends and acquaintances. He was amazed at the oak tree because it was growing, sprouting leaves, and joyously living, yet it was all alone. He knew that if he was all alone then things would be very different for him. Instead of growing he would start decaying. Instead of living he would begin dying. He would quickly lose his vigor, his health, his

strength, and his ability to flourish. He would lose his joy in life. That is why he was amazed at the tree's ability to grow when he knew that he could not.

After taking a branch from the oak tree and putting it in his room, the author says "It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends" (8). Afterwards he uses parenthesis to emphasize the following sentence relating to his friends, "(For I believe lately I think of little else than them)" (9). Here the author displays a powerful use of parenthesis. According to Oxford English Dictionary, parentheses are used to add supplementary information to a sentence. They are independent from the rest of the sentence and may be completely omitted without damaging the grammatical structure of the sentence. Using a sentence with parentheses in the poem, the author is adding significant insight to the meaning. In the line "(For I believe lately I think of little else than them:)" the speaker is realizing his growing dependence on his friends (9). He doesn't say straight out how he feels about his friends, but since his is thinking about them most of the time it gives insight to his true feelings. Taking the parentheses into consideration, the speaker is realizing how much his friends mean to him, but he is unable to say it out in the open. It is still something in his thoughts; a supplement to his feelings. It is something that he doesn't want to say out loud. It may even be something that he doesn't want to admit to himself and the thought is only subconscious. Whatever the meaning may be, it is evident that the speaker has hidden feelings confined inside of himself.

Walt Whitman ends the poem with a line that had been previously used in the poem, "I know very well I could not" (14). Previously he wrote "for I knew I could not" (6). The difference between line 6 and 14 is the use of an intensifier. The speaker intensifies the statement saying that he knows "very well" (14). After going through his poem and noticing the oak tree's ability to thrive without any companions, the speaker emphasizes once more in a stronger way

that he is incapable of living life in a comparable way. He needs his companions and he knows “very well” that he can’t do without them. The last line comes as a conclusion to the matter at hand. It is as if the speaker realizes his true feelings about his friends that he necessarily didn’t consider in the beginning of the poem.

The message conveyed through the poem is simple, but it is also very strong. Walt Whitman uses a nature vs. man comparison to get his hidden theme across to the readers. Instead of simply stating the message, he uses the example of the oak tree to make us realize our human weakness. The oak tree was happy and healthy despite being isolated on a “wide flat place” (12). However, people are not independent trees in a big forest who are capable of surviving alone. People need each other. Women need socialization, and men need companionship.

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