

Admiration and Doubt—Comparing *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* and *To Brooklyn Bridge*

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American poet, Walt Whitman and Harold Hart Crane both write poems about the place connecting Brooklyn and Manhattan, in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* and *To Brooklyn Bridge* respectively. By comparing the similarities of these two poems, this paper analyses the two poets' attitudes towards the development of modern society, finding that both poets not only show admiration for modern society but also doubt about the fast development. It aims to reveal the influence of fast development of modern society on people's mentality.

Keywords: *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, *To Brooklyn Bridge*, admiration, doubt

Introduction

American poet, Walt Whitman was born in Long Island of New York. As a New Yorker, he devotes his passionate love to this city. Many works of him are closely related to this city, since the rhythm of urban life has great influence on him. *Crossing Brooklyn Bridge* is a famous poem in his poetry anthology—*Leaves of Grass*. This poem wins Whitman the title of “The first city poet of the new world” (Killings, 2008). In his poem, he sings high praise of national spirit (Huang, 2005).

Another American writer, Harold Hart Crane, inherited Whitman's imagination: hope and doubt, order and chaos (Lehan, 1998). Having an experience of living in New York in 1924, for a time, Crane has an experience of living near Brooklyn Bridge, from which he could have a panorama of Brooklyn Bridge from his apartment. Inspired by Brooklyn Bridge—the poetry landmark of New York, he writes down the prelude to “The Bridge” *To Brooklyn Bridge*.

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry and *To Brooklyn Bridge* were written in 1856 and 1930 respectively. In these two poems, the place connecting Brooklyn district and Manhattan is the main scene depicted in the two poems. With the development of modernization, ferry is gradually replaced by the bridge. As important locations connecting two districts of New York, Ferry and Bridge witness thousands of men and women shuttle back and forth in these two districts, so there are some similarities in between. In these two poems, Walt Whitman and Harold Hart Crane both show their admiration for New York mixed with a little doubt about the development of modern society. And this similar experience and feeling of these two poets reveal the impact of fast development on people's mentality.

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Ferry and Bridge: Witness of Urban Changes

Ferry and bridge, especially a location between Brooklyn and Manhattan, have one thing in common—vital urban place. From this perspective, even though the development of modern society has changed the way of transportation from Brooklyn ferry to Brooklyn Bridge, ferry and bridge play the same important role in connecting two districts of New York.

In the poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Brooklyn ferry is a place where large flow of people gathered and converged. In 1950s, with the development of civilization, America enjoys a booming economy. Meanwhile, this country is confronted with instability. Many people choose to leave New York while many others go to this city with the dream of making a fortune. Whitman mentions some images from the bank of Brooklyn Ferry—such a bustling ferry, such as ships, steamboats, flag of all nation, granite storehouses by the dock, foundry chimneys (Ma, 2001), etc. These images are not expected to see in the past time, but the consequence of industrialization.

In the poem *To Brooklyn Bridge*, Harold Hart Crane also mentions many typical images of urbanization like “elevators”, “subway scuttle”, derricks”, “elevators” (Hammer, 2006), and so on. All these images make up a busy city scene. With the finish of industrialization and the development of civilization, a large influx of immigrants into America aggravated the instability of the city. As an important location, Brooklyn Bridge witnesses the changes over the years.

Admiration for Modern Society

Whitman deeply loves his motherland; it is not difficult to sense his genuine love for the country in this poem. In the forth stanza of *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Whitman directly expresses his love for the country. As the lines go, “I loved well those cities; I loved well the stately and rapid river” (Whitman, 2015). When Whitman witnesses the busy ferry, he could not help expressing his admiration for the development of his nation. For Whitman, nothing is more enjoyable than watching the beautiful scenery of the city; any piece of this city seems lovely. In the following stanza, the poet expresses his feeling about the sight he sees, such as river, sunset, waves of flood tide, seagulls over the sky, and the hay-boat in the twilight; all of these images seem to be attractive and beautiful and alluring in the poet’s eyes, “nothing is more stately and admirable than Manhattan” (Whitman, 2015). Whitman speaks out his love for the city directly.

In *To Brooklyn Bridge*, Brooklyn Bridge is not only an architecture, but also the symbolization of the nation spirit. Brooklyn Bridge spans the East River of New York and connects Brooklyn with Manhattan Island. Completed in 1883, it was the longest suspension bridge in the world at that time. Until now, it is still the landmark of New York, as famous as the Statue of Liberty and Empire State Building. Since its opening, it becomes the icon of New York, which symbolizes creativity and civilization of America. Such a magnificent architecture was a miracle at that time. Therefore, the construction of Brooklyn Bridge shows the great power of a nation and represents the development of modern society. In the past, people travel between Brooklyn and Manhattan by ferry, while thanks to the development of industry, ferry is replaced by bridge. This change is the manifestation of industrial development. The admiration for the development is more vividly shown in this poem, “building high over the chained bay waters Liberty” (Hammer, 2006), which not only shows the grand gesture of Brooklyn Bridge, but also praises the spirit of freedom embodied in the bridge. Since the bridge is a symbol of American creativity and the achievement of civilization, “O harp and altar” (Hammer, 2006), the

bridge is regarded as both “harp” and “altar”, which are related to music and religious worship. The metaphor of the bridge as “a harp” is suggested by the shape of the bridge. The altar is a holy place used in ceremonies, so this comparison regards Brooklyn Bridge as a place of sacrifice and worship. In the eyes of Hart Crane, Brooklyn Bridge is regarded holy and solemn which represents the spirit of modern society.

Doubt about Fast Development

Modernization leads to the constant expansion of cities, and the infinite expansion makes people feel the ineptitude and insignificance of one man. Therefore, the rapid urban change greatly affects feeling of citizens there.

Ferry is a common place in the city, and the place where people gather. In the 1950s and 1960s, the busy New York Ferry is the epitome of the whole city. The busy scenery of modern city is drawn by depicting ferry boats and bustling crowds.

In *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Whitman describes crowds of men and women with different social background cross two districts through Brooklyn ferry; Whitman is so curious about them so that he has the strong desire to know about them. As Whitman mentions in the sixth stanza, when he walks home late at night or lies in bed, some curious questions comes to him. And it looks as if the darkness falls on him, “it is not upon you alone the dark patches fall, the dark threw patches down upon me also” (Whitman, 2015). This darkness shows Whitman’s uncertainty and anxiety to fast development. When he sees the hope of the country, he also feels somewhat lost in such a fast-developing city. As Whitman wrote down, the best thing he used to do seems to be blank and suspicious at the present. He also experiences many evil human emotions. Greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, these feelings are just like the wolf, the snake, and the hog that almost engulf him. He shares the feeling of the rest, experiences not only happiness but also sadness.

In *To Brooklyn Bridge*, Hart Crane describes the scene around the bridge in one day. From seagulls to derricks, from elevators to subway scuttle, these images altogether formed a busy urban scene. However, one scene connected to the bridge is one man committing suicide (Huang, 2002). This scene seems to be absurd compared with the praise of the city in the front lines in the poem. This scene, however, shows another aspect of city life and symbolizes Hart Crane somewhat doubts whether the fast-development drives people crazy or not. Since the identity of the bedlamite is not mentioned, he could be anyone, a successful businessman or a tramp hanging in the street. There is possibility that the next one who commits suicide could be anyone living in this city. Still, in the next stanza, Hart Crane starts to change the perspective view; he observes prayer of pariah, cry of lover, the traffic lights that skim. These images convey a suffocating, restless, irritable, and anxious atmosphere. Unhappy scenes described and negative feelings generated in the poem reflect the doubt of Hart Crane.

Conclusion

The doubt about the fast development of city is an everlasting concern in the process of city development. Walt Whitman and Harold Hart Crane, never lose their hope for the development of modern society. However, the endless urban expansion somewhat makes them constantly doubt about the existing problems arising with the development of civilization, industrialization, and economy. Thus, in such a fast developing society, they suffer from doubt.

In general, both Whitman and Hart Crane sing high praise of their motherland, show admiration for the development of modern society, while such fast and tremendous changes cause a series of impact on people's mentality. Consequently, in *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* and *To Brooklyn Bridge*, Whitman and Hart Crane show they feel somewhat doubt about the fast developing society as well.

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