

Unleashing the Truth in Walt Whitman's *Animals*

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Abstract

Walt Whitman's poem *Animals* subtly critiques human nature by juxtaposing it with the honesty and simplicity of animals. Although at first glance, the poem seems to celebrate and praise the strengths of the animal kingdom, a closer look reveals Whitman's satirical tone, which exposes the hypocrisy, greed, and discontent present in human society. Whitman underscores the irony of humanity's sense of superiority, challenging the moral and ethical principles that guide human existence. The poem implies that animals, free from materialism, religion, and social structures, experience more fulfilling and peaceful lives. By exploring these themes, this article highlights the poet's appeal for introspection, encouraging humans to draw lessons from nature and get rid of pretentious beliefs in favour of a more authentic way of living.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, animals, free verse, hypocrisy, human nature, superiority complex, materialism, morality, self-contentment.

This article aims to explore how the poet, Walt Whitman through his poem, '*Animals*' by describing and appreciating the nature of animals is able to subtly mock and bring out the hypocrisy of human nature. It is a very short poem taken from Whitman's '*Songs of Myself*' from his huge poem collection called '*Leaves of Grass*' written around 1885. Even though it is a short poem, there is a lot of meaning to dissect from it. The poem brings to light the reality of human nature in a very open but at the same time in an almost satirical way. The contrast between the nature of animals and human beings is very evidently produced in the poem and that is what is going to be explored in this article.

Hailing from Long Island, New Jersey, Walt Whitman (May 31, 1819 to March 26, 1892) was an American poet, essayist and journalist. Being acquainted with the works of great writers such as Homer, Shakespeare and Dante, Whitman basically taught himself the art of writing. His most famous work is *Leaves of Grass*, from which the poem *Animals* is taken as mentioned in the previous paragraph. It is a book that continues to be widely read and studied as it has a profound influence on American literature and culture and its themes and ideas remain relevant and powerful to this day.

Whitman is known for writing poetry in free verse and rejects traditional rhyme and meter while using strong imagery and symbols. The same can be seen in his poem *Animals*. Whitman has used many literary devices in his poem including metaphor, hyperbole, repetition, and the most important one being personification where human qualities such as ‘whine’, ‘sweat’, ‘weep’, etc is attributed to animals for the reader to relate to what the poet is trying to convey through the poem.

On the surface, *Animals* appears to be a celebration of the natural world, with Whitman extolling the virtues and habits of all animals. However, as we delve deeper into the poem, it becomes clear that Whitman is using the animal kingdom as a mirror to reflect humanity’s own flaws and contradictions. Therefore, without much further ado let’s dive into dissecting the poem part by part.

Human beings are considered to be the most intelligent species to exist on Earth who have the authority and power over nature and other animals as it is stated in *The Holy Bible*, “Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” (Genesis 1:26-27)

However, human beings tend to have a superiority complex when it comes to being the most intelligent species among the others in nature and most of the time we tend to look down on animals as we think they’re less intelligent than us and their lives are of lesser value than ours. But Whitman through his poem is able to mock this thinking of most humans by contrasting the lives of human beings and animals. The poem brings to light the fact that even though humans think animals are of lesser importance, it is actually far from reality, as animals can teach mankind some really good things that mankind usually lack in their personalities and lives.

In the lines,

I think I could turn and live with animals, they're 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

It is quite evident how Whitman is mocking human nature by saying how even though humans look down on animals, they seem to be living a much more fulfilled and happier lives than human beings as animals do not really complain about their condition like humans tend to do but instead, they go about life being happy with whatever little they have. They do not have to slog in life to make a living and they find joy in the tiniest of things which allows them to lead peaceful lives without really thinking about the past or the future. Animals are also at an advantage as they do not have the ability to sin or commit evil like humans do and are pure by nature.

This however is not the case with humanity as humans tend to always be dissatisfied with everything that we possess. We tend to find fulfilment in the world which does not allow us to appreciate the things that we already have or to reach a point of full self-contentment. We tend to always complain about our struggles, pains and sorrows. We never try to focus on the good aspects of our lives but only ruminate on the bad aspects which in turn makes us to constantly think about our past actions and our future plans which makes us anxious. Thus, we always forget to live in the moment and appreciate life for what it is.

Our sinful nature prevents us from leading peaceful lives as we are engulfed by guilt most of the time that troubles our hearts, making it difficult for us to even get a good night's sleep and we tend to turn to God to cleanse us of our sins and mishaps yet we can never be truly peaceful because we somehow always find ourselves in the web of sin, sorrow, struggles and anxieties.

Therefore, even though we look down on animals, they definitely seem to be leading much better lives than us which teaches us how hypocritical human nature is; as we try to find faults and shortcomings in other creatures and things around us but in reality, we are the actual ones who live miserable lives due to our own nature and we fail to notice our own shortcomings. We are blinded

to this reality because of our superiority complex as human beings. A quote by Jonathan Balcombe which says, “I think we're insecure about our self-imposed spot at the top of the pyramid of life. New studies are continually undermining our superiority complex and forcing us to reconsider our relationship to animals.” substantiates the above point.

The lines,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,

No one is dissatisfied, nor one is demented with the mania of owning things,

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,

No one is respectable or unhappy over the whole Earth.

Show us how, even though animals were also created by God just like us, they still do not have any obligation whatsoever towards him. Neither are they greedy for materialistic things of the world. Nothing of that sort interests or intrigues them. Animals neither have to bow down to any authoritative figures whatsoever which in turns helps them to be carefree and joyful creatures who are full of life. They do not have to pretend to be something they're not just to satisfy some societal standards and expectations. They are not bound by any rules and regulations. Thus, they are always true to their own nature.

The very opposite is the case with mankind. Humans are bound by various religions of the world and they are expected to follow the principles and ideals of their respective religions. Humans have to worry about things like morality and ethics while animals do not. Even though the basis of every religion is rooted in love, brotherhood and doing what is right, humans tend to fight with one another in the name of religion and difference of opinions on morality and ethics. We also tend to live in an unethical and immoral way at some point in our lives. Again, bringing to light the pretentious and hypocritical nature of mankind.

Humans are nasty to one another even though they follow the rules of religion and place a lot of emphasis on morality and ethics, something which is not the case with animals. Sometimes, we find animals being more kind and compassionate than humans even though they do not have any concept of religion, moral and ethics.

A major thing humans struggle with is the vice of greed and the thirst for power. Humans lead very materialistic lives and are obsessed with climbing the social ladder and it does not matter which path they choose to reach the top of the ladder. Humans have placed monetary value on pieces of paper which is the root cause of mankind's greed and selfishness. This gives rise to big issues like over consumption, class discrimination, inequality in different strata of society and corruption in human society. Animals on the other hand do not deal with any such issues in their lives.

A quote by the Nigerian playwright and novelist Wole Soyinka states, "We live in a materialistic world, and materialism appeals so strongly to humanity, no matter where", clearly shows how flawed human society has become because of materialism and greed. We let greed overtake our ability to think rationally multiple times which leads to all the issues mentioned above.

Another thing that humans struggle with is authority and over-zealous patriotism. Humans are bound to various authoritative figures in various walks of life in the form of our families, bosses, institutionalized authority, political authority etc. We often find ourselves lacking autonomy in our own lives as we are expected to respect and honour and follow the opinions, decisions and rules of authoritative figures in our lives. Not only that but humans sometimes tend to be overly zealous about their respective countries and the country's past history and important figures pertaining to a country's rich history.

Humans feel proud about their history and of course there is not anything wrong about it but the problem arises when this pride becomes excessive and leads people to have wars against different countries. This leads to nothing but ignorance, chaos, terrorism, loss of life, colonialism etc, Humans fight with each other in the name of patriotism which leads to problems on a massive scale. Issues like this cause people to lose freedom and makes them spend their whole either fighting for freedom or living in fear.

Animals do not have to deal with any such issues and are born with freedom and they do not have to fight for it as it is naturally given to them. They lead peaceful lives and go about their daily lives in a carefree manner fearlessly. Even if they do face any challenges and distress, a human being would actually be the one responsible for it. For example, wild animals are poached, birds are caged causing their freedom to be snatched away from them, domestic animals are

tortured and abused and various ways in which humans are the ones who inflict pain and suffering unto animals. Animals are not innately subjected to the evils of the world unlike humans.

Finally in the lines,

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?

Whitman says that he seems to resonate more with the animal kingdom than the human world and he has no problem detaching himself from the human world as he thinks it is way too corrupt to live in; whereas the animal world seems to be more peaceful as he finds that animals have made him realise the good things about his own human nature and where he falters as well because of his nature, which lacks in so many aspects.

Whitman realises that he does share a lot of qualities with the animal kingdom; hence the ‘tokens of myself’ symbolises the poet coming to terms with his inner self and his nature through the lives and actions of animals. He feels as though the tinniest of traits of animals teaches him something about himself and that he would love to be spending his life with them more than with humanity.

The final rhetorical question, “Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?” shows how the poet feels as though he was one with the animal kingdom but strayed away as time passed by and has finally found his way back.

The tone of the stanza seems very sarcastic. That is to say that humans technically do have a lot in common with the animal kingdom and alludes to the theory that we all may have evolved from the animal world. Therefore, we do not need to think too high and mighty about ourselves and look down on the animal kingdom but rather, try to learn, rectify and identify ourselves with the good qualities and traits of animals.

The stanza also warns us that if we stray too far from the natural world and the laws of nature, we are bound to fall into trouble and there will be a disconnect with humanity and the

natural world. We are called to heal and nurture our relationship with ourselves, with each other, and eventually with all the creatures and life forms that co-exist with us.

Once we learn to get rid of our superiority complex and hypocrisy and try to learn from nature, our lives will take a drastic turn and will turn out to be more beautiful as nature is our helper and healer. To support this thought, the lines from the poem, *Tables Turned* by William Wordsworth beautifully state,

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!

He, too, is no mean preacher:

Come forth into the light of things,

Let Nature be your teacher.

The above lines show us how even a little bird like a throstle can teach us so much about life and enlighten us. Wordsworth also clearly mentions the idea of letting nature be our teacher as it can truly transform us and this is also what Whitman tries to convey in his poem but he does it by bringing to light all the flaws of humanity and how animals and nature can help change those flaws if only we paid heed to them.

Therefore, in conclusion, this article, with the help of Walt Whitman's poem, *Animals*, aimed to bring to light the reality of human nature when compared to the nature of animals. It makes us introspect on our own lives, thoughts and actions and the deeper meaning of the poem truly helps us to ponder upon mankind and our hypocritical actions as a species. It teaches us that our superiority complex is silly and unnecessary, as animals, whom we think are less than us actually lead much more compassionate, kind, joyful, carefree and fulfilling lives. Thus, we can learn quite a lot about how we ought to live out our lives from animals.

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