



Brooklyn *in the* Civil War



Unit: Daily Life

Lesson 4.5: “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by Walt Whitman (two periods)

Aim: To learn about transportation in mid-19th-century Brooklyn

Objective: Students look at several photographs of Brooklyn transport from the era and read Walt Whitman’s poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” In addition to making critical observations and comparisons about then and now, students create short original poems à la Whitman.

Materials:

1. Vintage photos of Brooklyn transport on overhead or printouts
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/cwdoc002.html>,
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/cwdoc009.html>,
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/cwdoc031.html>,
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/civilwar/cwdoc093.html>
2. “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by Walt Whitman on overhead or printout (excerpt from section 3, and entire poem on following pages)
http://www.vasudevaserver.com/home/sites/poetseers.org/html/earlyamericans/walt_whitman/index/crossing_brooklyn_ferry

Procedure:

1. Students brainstorm modern means of transportation on blackboard.
2. Students study vintage photos (either as a class on overhead or with printouts in small groups) and make observations about transport in old Brooklyn.
3. Students create a Venn diagram comparing today’s means of transportation with transportation 150 years ago.
4. Teacher introduces poem:
“One of Whitman’s most famous poems is ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ in which the poet writes to future passengers about his impressions of what he sees as well as his feeling of connectedness to those who will come after him as he rides the ferry to Brooklyn. Remember, the Brooklyn Bridge was not completed until 1883. The ferries carried more than 32 million passengers to and from Manhattan each year. For a penny or two, commuters took the ferry as routinely as we ride the subway today.

What is now the ‘DUMBO’ (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) area of Brooklyn was once bustling with ferry traffic from morning till night.”

5. In this lesson, students focus on the beginning of section 3. *Using Whitman’s stem, “Just as you...., I...,” students write their own 5 lines, reflecting on their daily walk to school (or bus or subway ride).* They write their own poems to their peers of the future in an effort to establish a connection with them.
 - a. Ask students to observe pattern in section 3.
 - b. Write pattern on board.
 - c. Give writing assignment (in italics above).
 - d. Students write and share poems.
 - e. Optional: Students can illustrate their poems for bulletin board display.

Students should note how Whitman’s connections deal with his inner thoughts, his sensory perception, and his actions. They, too, should attempt to connect with those who will come after them in all of these ways.

Example:

Just as you feel bleary-eyed as you trudge these icy streets to school, I felt.

Just as you hurry your pace, late again, I hurried.

Just as you worry about the morning’s upcoming math test, I worried.

Just as you brighten at the sight of a good friend, I brightened.

Just as you walk through these doors to face another school day, I walked.

Excerpt from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by Walt Whitman

3

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt.
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright
flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift
current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-
stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

Complete Text of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by Walt Whitman

1

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west-sun there half an hour high—I see you also face
to face.
Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious
you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning
home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more
to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the
day,
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every
one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on
the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away,
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to
shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the
heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half
an hour high,
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others
will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the
falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

3

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many
generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,

Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
bright flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift
current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the
thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air
floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left
the rest in strong shadow,
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the
south,
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my
head in the sunlit water,
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at
anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender
serpentine pennants,
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their
pilotheuses,

The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the
wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the
frolic-some crests and glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the
granite storehouses by the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on
each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,
On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning
high and glaringly into the night,
Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow
light over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of
streets.

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me,
Others the same-others who look back on me because I look'd forward
to them,
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

5

What is it then between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails
not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the
waters around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon
me,
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I
should be of my body.

6

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,

The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality
meagre?
Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me.
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not
wanting,

Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these
wanting,
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call'd by my highest name by clear loud voices of young men as

they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of
their flesh against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet
never told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing,
sleeping,
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we
like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

7

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my
stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you
now, for all you cannot see me?

8

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than
mast-hemm'd Manhattan?
River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the
twilight, and the belated lighter?

What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with
voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as
I approach?
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that
looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not
accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

9

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the

men and women generations after me!
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of
Brooklyn!
Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public
assembly!
Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my
nighest name!
Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or
actress!
Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one
makes it!
Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be
looking upon you;
Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet
haste with the hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in
the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all
downcast eyes have time to take it from you!
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any
one's head, in the sunlit water!
Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail'd
schooners, sloops, lighters!
Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!
Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at
nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our divinest
aromas,
Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and
sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate
henceforward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves
from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently
within us,

We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.