

Walt Whitman: *Patrolling Barnegat*

Nature is the general theme of this poem, more specifically nature as massively powerful and threatening to man who is often at the mercy of the elements.

Whitman suggests the idea of evil spirits by describing the wind as shouts of "demoniac laughter" [3] and seeing "waves, air, midnight" [4] as a savage trinity (three-in-one) - an image that appears again in the last line of the poem: "That savage trinity warily watching". Readers would compare this "savage trinity" to the Christian Holy Trinity of Father (God), Son (Jesus) and Holy Ghost (Spirit).

He shows the reader how the person patrolling cannot be sure what is happening in this wild sea storm. He refers in the penultimate line to "dim, weird forms" [13] and earlier questions what it is he is seeing: "That in the distance! Is it a wreck and is the red signal flaring?" [9].

Whitman uses anthropomorphism or animism to enforce his theme, ie he writes about natural things as if they are features of a person or intelligent creature, such as the "muttering" and "laughter" of lines 2 and 3 respectively.

He also writes as if the natural world has attitudes or feelings, with qualifiers (adjectives and adverbs) like "wild", "fitfully", "fierce", "watchful", "tireless" and "never remitting". It is not clear whether the struggling and watching at the end of the poem are also being done by natural things or by real people.

Images

All of the images are of things that are really (or literally) there to be seen. But they may also represent other things.

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We have spoken about the effect of Whitman's use of the present participle in his verbs. The verbs he has chosen are those of motion: "running"; "lashing"; "careering"; "breasting"; "advancing"; "flaring"; "wending"; "never remitting"; "confronting".

His vocabulary is not complex, but has been chosen predominantly for its sound effects as we saw in **Patterns and sounds**. Both his choice of words and the sounds emphasise the essential effect of constant, violent motion achieved in the poem.