

## **Freshman Papers 1999 Winner Jenna Hammerich**

Words from Jenna:

As a fan of Stephen King and Anne Rice, I often find myself defending my choice of reading. This happened so frequently that I began to wonder why some of us indulge ourselves by dabbling in the macabre while others deny having any fascination with it whatsoever. Janet McCracken's philosophy class in aesthetics provided me the opportunity to explore and attempt to understand this intriguing mystery. Through the extensive reading required for the course, I realized that philosophers throughout history have struggled with the same issue. Freud's concept of the pleasure principle coupled with Nietzsche's notion of human nature as the product of a dialectic provides an adequate foundation for learning what makes horror stories, grotesque paintings, and even our own cuts and bruises so appealing. As an English major and psychology minor, I am regularly inspired to discover the truths that underlie human behavior. However, it is possible to tire of poring over philosophy texts and masterpieces of medieval literature. Aside from reading and writing, I love to travel and experience everything that I can!

### **Social Contact vs. Isolation In "Song of Myself" and "A Noiseless Patient Spider"**

Common sense and fundamental sociology both assert that human beings require social interaction. It has been proven that people socialized beginning at a very young age develop stronger personalities and more virile, receptive minds than those who are not provided with more or less constant interaction. In addition to needing extensive social contact to emotionally develop correctly, people also *desire* it in much the same way they desire sleep. Those who do not we negatively term "outsiders" or "loners," suggesting that as a society, we value and recognize thorough socialization as right and normal. However, freedom, the concept most central to the American way of life, suggests that as Americans, we value individualism over conformity. So in the very nature of American society we find a contradiction—do we interact and conform even though we may lose our individualities?

Walt Whitman, the so-called "American Bard," examines just what it means to stand apart from and then involve one's self in the ever combining, restless American civilization. Whitman takes the stance that most Americans do, however unconscious of it they may be: He values the individual over the whole, but emphasizes the general idea of wholeness rather than focusing on the importance of social interaction. Many of his poems revolve around the concept of being an outsider versus being part of the elaborate social structure. This is especially true of "Song of Myself" and "A Noiseless Patient Spider." In each poem it is obvious how comfortable he is with his solitude, but at the same time it is clear that he wants to feel like a part of the whole.

He provides an intense analysis of what it means to be Walt Whitman, the human being, in his poem, "Song of Myself," which introduces his complete book of poetry, Leaves of Grass. "Song..." celebrates wholeness as well as individuality, social contact as well as isolation. The respective concepts of social contact and isolation are contradictory and yet he emphasizes both in his poetry. The reader must decide which position Whitman takes by carefully interpreting each of the 52 sections in "Song of Myself." Sometimes the narrator seems to be

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