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The Joy of Melancholy

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The Joy of Melancholy

Depression (as I see it, at least) causes apathy in the face of this unease [that the world is a place of suffering], lethargy approaching total paralysis, an inability to feel much of anything one way or another. In contrast, melancholia (in my eyes) generates a deep feeling in regard to this same anxiety, a turbulence of heart that results in an active questioning of the status quo, a perpetual longing to create new ways of being and seeing. (8)

Eric Wilson describes the difference between depression and melancholia in his book, *Against Happiness: In Favor of Melancholia*, arguing that the American culture has yet to make a distinction between the two because of our culture's obsession with happiness. Rather, society's historic fear of emotional states associated with depression has hindered our culture's ability to feel melancholic by only accepting positive emotions, like happiness. Melancholy has been defined in numerous ways throughout history, but numerous authors like Wilson, such as Marsilio Ficino, Jonathan Flatley, and Walt Whitman, observe that morose contemplation during melancholic moods is an active process that results in creation, rather than a stagnation of the mind and soul. In literature, the darkness of night is used as a common representation of darker emotional themes that a melancholic ponders. Nighttime is traditionally designated as the hours for melancholic contemplation, a result of society's repression of "distasteful" topics during the light of day. Society's resentment of melancholy thus extends to the night as well, furthering the

fear of emotional darkness to fear of darkness itself. Ironically, the stars during the night have been a reminder for humanity of ultimate light out of the darkness, a unique view that has served practical purposes for humanity, as well as inspire authors like Whitman and Beston to seek the stars and darkness of night to better navigate the mind and soul. Studies have found that “depressive” emotions impact creativity differently than positive emotions. Further, writers in particular are more inclined to feel negative emotions, which contributes to why writers like Whitman dare to venture into the darkness of night to experience the “active questioning” to “create new ways of being and seeing” that Wilson characterizes as melancholia—to inspire new creativity. Whitman’s depicts his personal melancholy through night imagery in *Leaves of Grass*, his most famous contribution to society. In more recent literature, writers like Beston and Bogard, have observed that night skies being eliminated by society’s introduction of artificial lighting that suppresses the darkness and the stars with light. While authors advocate the benefits of embracing melancholy and the night to appreciate all aspects of creativity, even with scientific studies that support enhanced creativity from negative emotions, humanity’s historic fear of darkness, both physically and mentally, continues in society’s rejection of melancholy and suppression of the night, thus rejecting potential creativity and half of life.

Poet Walt Whitman portrays melancholy in *Leaves of Grass* as a mood that occupies the mind with gloomy contemplation, ironically essential in order to know joy in any other realm of life. Whitman describes the joy of melancholy in “A Song of Joys”:

Yet O my soul supreme!

Know’st thou the joys of pensive thought?

Joys of the free and lonesome heart, the tender, gloomy heart?

Joys of the solitary walk, the spirit bow'd yet proud, the suffering and the
struggle?

The agonistic throes, the ecstasies, joys of the solemn musings day or night?

Joys of the thought of Death, the great spheres Time and Space? (210-219)

In literature, death is usually posed in opposition with life and “closely associated with the assessment of life...death is welcomed as release or liberation” (Daemmrich, Horst 78). The “Joys of the thought of Death” that Whitman describes is the mind released or freed from normal themes of life. *The Dictionary of Literary Symbolism* by Michael Ferber notes that light is commonly used in literature to represent themes of life as it is “traditionally linked with goodness, life, and knowledge...” (115), which provides an explanation of modern society’s affinity for light rather than darkness, a symbolic choosing of life over death. Though light may represent life, Wilson asserts that for a melancholic, “Death in this light is not merely decay or rot or grave. It is a call to life, an electrical jolt enjoining us to explore, with vigor and wit, our own odds and risks” (44). Whitman describes the solitary “pensive thought” of gloom, suffering, and death as a solemn, yet joyous musing because darker themes encourage assessment of life from a different perspective. Thus, melancholic contemplation of darker themes does not place value in death over life, but rather, provokes “a call to life” as Wilson asserts, resulting in thought that breaks from the norm in new appreciation, evaluation, and exploration of life.

Whitman’s ironic acknowledgment of both life and death in order to know joy, “day or night,” is his expression of melancholy in “Song of Joys” through the concept of romantic irony. Wilson argues that melancholy and romantic irony cannot exist without each other, stating:

Melancholy irony—Romantic irony—is the ability to play among various forms without becoming overly attached to any one form. In this way, this kind of irony,

gloomy in its persistent insecurity yet bracing in its constant vitality, is capable of vacillating back and forth between the earth's polarities, of dwelling for long periods in the rich limbo of the between. (140)

Wilson describes “the rich limbo of the between” of the earth's natural opposites as the grey area that a melancholic thrives in, comparably to how the speaker in Whitman's “Song of Joys” broods in the midst of the “agonistic throes” and “ecstasies.” American culture is currently incapable of appreciating the benefits of observing the “rich limbo of the between” like a melancholic because society is hyper-focused solely on the positive side of the emotional spectrum, rather than “vacillating back and forth between the earth's polarities,” as Wilson suggests. Society's observed repression of the darker half of natural opposites (death, darkness, and night), results in a lesser appreciation of its opposites (life, light, and day). Indeed, as Whitman further states in “Song of Joys”: “For not life's joys alone I sing, repeating—the joy of death!” (230), emphasizing the necessity of the relationship between earth's polarities to experience joy from a balanced perception of life.

Why would humanity continue to reject darkness in spite of compelling arguments by authors, like Wilson and Whitman, who write of the “joys” of melancholy? The history of melancholy originates as far back in history as Ancient Greece when it was believed by medical practitioners that the four elements of the earth affected the four humors within the human body. This belief significantly influenced the teaching of historic figures like Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Galen, and remained the main medical practice in Europe for centuries (“Humors”). In literature, the four humors are commonly known as melancholic, choleric, phlegmatic, and sanguine (National Institutes of Health “The World of Shakespeare's Humors”). According to *The Dictionary of Literary Symbolism*, the humor that pertains to the importance of darkness is

the melancholic humor, or *melancholia*, Greek for “black bile” (Ferber 124). Black bile in the body was thought to cause “severe endogenous depression, with loss of interest and pleasure in normal activities, disturbance of sleep and appetite, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, and thoughts of death or suicide” (OED). Further, melancholia is attributed characteristics such as, “sympathetic to nighttime, [and] to the color black...” (Ferber 124). The undesirable actions and emotions associated with a melancholic mood is why writers find darkness, particularly the setting of night, more accessible to contemplate death, grief, and sadness. Melancholy’s association with death and darkness partly explains society’s early labeling of black bile as a negative humor within the body and melancholy’s historic inhabitation of the hours of night.

While melancholia continues to be considered a diagnosable affliction by the medical profession, philosophers and writers have, rather, evaluated melancholia as a mood beneficial to the mind and soul. *The Dictionary of Literary Symbolism* describes melancholy as an emotional process “associated with medication, introspection, study, and the idle imagination” (124). Despite popular belief that the melancholic humor is a negative presence in the body, Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, instead theorizes in his *Book of Life* that humans can be positively affected by the melancholic humor from the deep, internal conflict that inspires introspection and study—a time that the mind need not fear or avoid if properly balanced by other humors. Ficino cautions, “Only that black bile which we call natural, therefore, leads us to judgment and wisdom—but not always. If it is alone, it beclouds the spirit with a mass that is black and dense, terrifies the soul, and dulls the intelligence” (117). Ficino advises a balance of humors instead of an excess of black bile, which he believed would overwhelm and paralyze the soul with darkness, a belief that has endured in modern society.

The inescapable darkness from an excess of black bile that Ficino depicts is representative of current society's typical envisioning of a melancholic experience. Today, medical fields use *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*, as "the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the United States and contains a listing of diagnostic criteria for every psychiatric disorder recognized by the U.S. healthcare system" (American Psychiatric Association "About DSM-5"). The diagnosis of melancholia and depression in the DSM-5 as "melancholic depression" is problematic from the immediate assumption that melancholy and depression are synonymous, or that melancholy is a kind of depression. A quick search on Google will show the prominence in modern media of the belief that melancholy can be equated to depression from the immediate grouping of the two, as "melancholic depression." While the DSM-5 represents the accepted view of the medical profession, like the questioning of Wilson and Ficino, its diagnoses, are still debated among professionals in the medical field. Some psychologists have recently argued that the diagnosis of depression is problematic, as "Depression is a deepened or prolonged sadness in everyday life, but melancholia has a distinct quality of mood that cannot be interpreted as severe depression" (Zasshi "Abstract"). Agreeing with the inaccurate distinctions of the recent edition of the DSM-5, mental health journalist John McManamy observes, "Unfortunately, the DSM-5 left the rest of its depression criteria exactly as they found it, virtually unchanged since the 1980 publication of the DSM-III" ("Depression"). Therefore, the diagnosis of depression that the public understands from the standard definition of the DSM-5 promotes an inaccurate representation of how medical professions argue depression and melancholy should be defined.

The ambivalence of the conflicted views on how melancholy and depression should be defined by medical professionals is reflective of society's historic misunderstanding of

melancholia. As author and physician Anton Chekhov famously wrote, “If many remedies are prescribed for an illness, you may be certain that the illness has no cure.” Chekhov’s saying applied to melancholia indicates that moods of melancholy have no cure. In *Affective Mapping*, Jonathan Flatley argues that melancholy should not be understood as an illness, but historically, “in what increasingly became an autonomous social and cultural sphere, melancholia was becoming medicalized; it becomes a mental illness to be studied, categorized, and treated. Slowly during the nineteenth century the humoral understanding was displaced, and in this context also the term *depression* began to supplant *melancholia*” (38-39). Thus, modern society has only further distorted melancholia within the medical profession, by lumping melancholy as synonymous to depression—as an illness to be cured.

Contrary to the predominant rejection of melancholy by society, Ficino instead advocates for a balance between the humors in order to fully experience the potential benefits available from all emotional states of the human mind and soul. According to Ficino’s observations, black bile naturally results from the, “pursuit of the sciences, especially the difficult ones, [because] the soul must draw in upon itself from external things to internal as from the circumference to the very center (as I might say) of man” (113). In this way, black bile serves as the force within the body that activates the soul’s contemplation of itself in relation to the whole, like an individual’s realization of self-purpose that provides meaning within society as a whole (Ficino 115). The belief in melancholia as a substance of black bile that has influence on the body and human intellect is an antiquated belief in medical practice today, though Ficino’s belief in the melancholic humor as a beneficial source of intellect and wisdom provides a piece to the foundation of melancholia’s relationship with humanity and why writers would continue to seek and value experiences of melancholy.

Ficino is not alone in his belief that melancholia has something to offer the intellectual mind. While it has been observed that society currently considers melancholy as a condition under the overarching umbrella of depression, Flatley further discusses in *Affective Mapping* that there are differences in kinds of melancholies, and more importantly, that not all are depressing. Flatley observes, “some melancholias are the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world” (1). Based on his research on melancholy, Flatley discusses Robert Burton’s term, “melancholizing” from *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Flatley observes that “...melancholizing [to Burton] is something one *does*: longing for lost loves, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires, and lingering on events from the past. It is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge” (2). Thus, the melancholic’s mind is active, seeking “new ways of being and seeing” as Wilson stated, in a way that a paralyzed, depressed mind could not. As Burton observes, the action of melancholizing is not a repression of the mind, but rather, an active, contemplative state of mind that observes and questions one’s surroundings. Melancholia is the tool and way of thinking that keeps the mind active and generates an interest in one’s surroundings, as Flatley observed, which is the kind of study that Ficino believed black bile could serve for an intellectual mind.

Used as a verb, melancholizing inherently implies action—the opposite of a depressive’s static mind. As Wilson argues, clinical depression, the “total paralysis” of the mind, which Ficino also describes, is not being called into question; clinical depression is a reality for many people, a fact that adds to society’s fear of any negative emotions perceived as “depressing.” However, Wilson questions the American culture’s confusion between depression and melancholy, “treat[ing] melancholia as an aberrant state, a vile threat to our pervasive notions of

happiness” (8). Wilson sees the melancholic mood of “active questioning of the status quo” as an alternative state of darker contemplation that creatively benefits the mind by encouraging new knowledge, just as Flatley and Ficino promote, without succumbing to depression. Further, melancholic moods are not an “aberrant state,” but the natural opposite the accepted standards that Whitman advocates as essential in “Song of Joys.” Wilson believes the public is too quick to reject melancholy because it threatens “the American craze for happiness” (9). American’s obsession with happiness, combined with the current confusion of melancholy as depression fosters a deep misunderstanding of the potential benefits of melancholy moods that Wilson argues. The misperceptions that society currently upholds restricts the majority of society from seeing certain “new ways of being and seeing,” as humanity is content to live only within the comfort of what is known during the day, rather than venturing into the unknown of night. This way of being is actually closer to the depressive state of mind that Wilson describes, in the way that the mind remains in the same, constant state, never questioning what is known, never longing to question the status quo. As Wilson suggests, any kind of one-side living, positive or negative, results in a loss of the mind’s potential to create and appreciation of life as a whole.

Despite Wilson’s arguments, American culture continues to assign happiness as the ultimate goal. German philosopher, Josef Pieper depicts his theory of how to obtain happiness in *Happiness and Contemplation*. Pieper’s book is entirely devoted to the theory of achieving happiness through thoughtful contemplation that allows an individual to see the world in a new, inspiring way, similar to Wilson’s depiction of melancholy. Even in a book entirely focused on happiness, Pieper cannot omit its natural emotional opposite, stating, “But no one who thinks of the world as at bottom unredeemable can accept the idea that contemplation is the supreme happiness of man. Neither happiness nor contemplation is possible except on the basis of consent

to the world as a whole...It is a consent that may be granted amid tears and the extremes of horror” (106). Therefore, Pieper’s theory of contemplation and happiness cannot be achieved without knowing the darker side of life, as Wilson observes.

The association of melancholy with creativity has been overshadowed by the multitude of scientific studies that advocate how positive emotions are the beneficial source of human health, both mentally and physically, which are in stark opposition to Wilson, Ficino and Pieper arguments. While many scientific studies have indeed found that happiness can result in creativity, research analyst Geir Kaufmann challenges the popular, “positive-mood-promotes-creativity hypothesis” (134) as the only source of creativity. Kaufmann argues that this one-sided conclusion is “conceptually and theoretically ill founded, and that empirical evidence in stock so far so not support such a sweeping, general empirical conclusion” (132). Kaufmann’s review suggests that creativity cannot be sufficiently explained from one side of the spectrum, but rather, creativity is influenced by positive and negative emotional states, and quite possibly in different ways.

While happiness is what society may be searching for, creative inspiration is what writers search for. How writers express creativity varies, though the kind of creativity that melancholia has been observed to inspire is, perhaps, most vividly expressed and understood through poetry. Poet Dylan Thomas notably observes poetry as: “Poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toe nails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own.” Thomas depicts the emotional experience of reading poetry as comparable to how melancholic moods inspire writers to view the world. Pieper also emphasizes, “the vital function of the arts in man’s life consists above all in this: that through

them [true poetry and all real art] contemplation of the created world is kept active and alive” (85). Most recently, in honor of 2015’s World Poetry Day, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Director-General, Irina Bokova, stated, “perhaps never before have we needed the power of poetry to bring women and men together, to craft new forms of dialogue, to nurture the creativity all societies need today” (“World Poetry Day”). Even in modern culture, poetry has remained the ideal outlet of creativity that has the power to relate to all of humanity.

In American literature, Whitman’s composition of *Leaves of Grass* is an exemplarily collection of creative poetry that displays Wilson’s belief of the “active questioning of the status quo” of melancholic moods. In the nineteenth century, Whitman’s controversial poetry resulted in the first few publications of *Leaves of Grass* to be received unfavorably by the general public. In 1891, one reviewer of *Leaves of Grass* stated, “There is a melancholy flavor about the whole of it, though the old man tries very hard to be cheerful. More than once, however, he refers to the world’s refusal to recognize him as a poet” (Anonymous, “Whitman’s Farewell”). Another reviewer commented, “It has been a melancholy task to read this book; and it is a still more melancholy one to write about it” (James “Mr. Walt Whitman”). Yet, in spite of the unimpressed majority, others concluded: “For the sum of 75 cents any reader may accompany Whitman through a poetic chaos—bright, dark, splendid, common, ridiculous and sublime—in which are floating the nebulae and germs of matter for a starry universe of organized and harmonious systems that may yet revolve, in all the magnificence of artistic order, through the highest heaven of fame!” (Anonymous “Our Book Table”). The reviewer’s description of experiencing Whitman’s personal “poetic chaos” is an accurate portrayal of how Whitman intended his poems

to be read, which may be why his publication of *Leaves of Grass* was received by mixed reviews.

Whitman portrays his personal experiences to his reader by his unique intentions behind his use of “I” as the voice of the speaker of his poems. In *Collage of Myself*, literary critic Matt Miller describes how Whitman’s poems are intentionally meant for the union of the reader and Whitman’s personal life: “For the communion of souls Whitman envisions to be complete, not only must the poet dilate to include the reader, but the reader too must dilate to become and include the poet: only then will the true idiom of ‘souls’ be understood” (143). Whitman affirms his intentions behind his use of “I” in a statement about *Leaves of Grass*: “I am personal...my book compels, absolutely necessitates, every reader to transpose himself or herself into the central position...” (vii). Whitman’s use of “I” implores his audience to insert themselves into the position of the speaker to internalize his poems on an individual level, offering a vicarious experience of personal emotions he has felt.

The dual identity of Whitman’s speaker is demonstrated in *Leaves of Grass*, particularly in the beginning of “Song of Myself.” Whitman begins the poem by stating, “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (1-3). “I” in these lines indicates that the reader should assume what Whitman assumes, as his experiences fuse with the readers and together, comprise the speaker of his poems. Geoffrey Schramm observes, “through his [Whitman’s] frequent use of “I,” “me,” and “you,” that the “myself” he was singing about could stand in for every American” (“Whitman’s Lifelong Endeavor”). By using “I,” Whitman confronts the general population with his personal melancholia, an emotional experience normally unexplored in the light of day.

Through his poetry, Whitman pushes against the historic societal boundaries of a culture that avidly avoids themes of darkness.

Whitman is attributed as a new kind of poet during his time, “who speaks from and with the whole body and who writes *outside*, in Nature, not in the library. It was what Whitman called ‘al fresco’ poetry, poetry written outside the walls, the bounds, of convention and tradition” (Folsom and Price “Walt Whitman”). Whitman depicts of his personal melancholy through night imagery, an efficient image for his audience as a relatable setting of darkness. Unsurprisingly, melancholia as the “sympathetic humor of the nighttime” (Ferber 124) is commonly represented in nature literature by night. In Whitman’s “Night on the Prairies,” “I walk by myself—I stand and look at the stars, which I think now I never realized before” (4-5); setting night as the time contemplation occurs, the speaker feels melancholic, “I absorb immortality and peace, / I admire death, and test propositions” (6-7). In these lines, Whitman implores the reader to look at the stars, to experience the darkness and admire death, to step outside of the boundaries of day and see the beauty in how “life cannot exhibit all to me - as the day / cannot” (25-26). Whitman’s description of his pondering of death requires the reader to acknowledge and admire death as he has during the night, not only a symbolic time within literature that indicates emotions or thoughts associated with melancholy, but also an emotional experience that challenges society’s rejection of melancholy.

Writers have historically had a melancholic relationship with the night. In *The Space Book*, Jim Bell notes how for thousands of years, our culture’s perception of the universe revolved around Ptolemy’s geocentric model, which placed Earth in the center of the universe (66). Then, Nicolaus Copernicus introduced the heliocentric model during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, placing the sun as the center of the universe rather than the Earth (Bell 114).

After the long-held belief in a geocentric universe, claims like Copernicus's against the predominant Roman Catholic faith in creationism was not only a critique of the way the universe was formed, but also of the core of the culture's belief system. Roman Catholics rejected any questioning of creationism and banned books like Copernicus's that advocated for the heliocentric model (Leveillee 1). Incidentally, *Leaves of Grass* was also banned for a span of time in Boston during 1882 because Whitman's verses were viewed as too violating for literature of the time (Schramm "Whitman's Lifelong Endeavor"). Wilson's description of a melancholic mood as an "active questioning of societal norms" most certainly applies here, as the originality of Whitman's poetry caused such a tumultuous reaction from the public. As science progressed, the Earth evolved from one Earth to one of many "Earths" in the universe, finally resulting in reality that the universe is "without any center at all and apparently brimming with many Earths" (Bell 66). As science progressed and completely overturned religious beliefs, tension only increased between the two spheres of knowledge.

Scientific advancements that dared to question mysteries of the universe caused anxiety in society, yet humanity has historically looked to the stars for answers, gaining multiple benefits from viewing the night sky. Astrology and astronomy were the first real sciences that humans believed in, structured their lives around, and learned from, even regarded as influential on the four humors of the body where black bile originates. Bell illuminates the early importance of interpreting what the stars offered to humanity, stating, "Knowing how to read the sky translated directly into knowing when to plant, irrigate, and harvest, and a stable food supply gave them time to invent writing, arithmetic, geometry, and algebra" (66). Reading the stars provided humanity with information like a survival guidebook, enabling civilization to navigate, track seasons, and keep time to thrive and properly farm their crops. Not only useful for practical

purposes, the informative stars freed up time that would normally be spent working to survive, allowing humanity time to reflect on other intellectual aspects of being, like writing and other sciences (Bell 66). Stars became a witness of humanity's history, incorporated into literature as a visual representation of humanity's past.

Chet Raymo illuminates the importance of the stars during the night in his book, *The Soul of the Night: An Astrological Pilgrimage*. Raymo asserts that, "No part of our environment is so rich an archive of other intelligences as the night sky. The night is a repository of human cultural history. The names of the stars are entries in a family album that show us what we have been and what we have become" (141). In literature, the stars therefore become a natural representation of the history of humanity's progression and intellectual ability. A.J. Meadows, author of *The High Firmament: A Survey of Astronomy in English Literature*, observes that society's historic view of universe was such that if "The order of the universe was essentially stable; so then should be the social order on Earth. It is therefore not surprising that...when life began to change rapidly, there should have been great emphasis on the cosmic importance of preserving order" (27-28) When progressing science questioned life on Earth, humanity looked to the cosmos to "preserve order." When science began questioning the mysteries of the universe, humanity could still look up to the stars and find comfort from the fact that past generations of humanity have also witnessed the same starry sky. As the ever-present light in the dark, the stars provide evidence of humanity's continual perseverance, encouraging an individual to confront the present and navigate within the darkness to find new truth and meaning.

Whitman conveys meaning and his observations of humanity through nature in *Leaves of Grass*. Commenting on Whitman's poetry, literary critic Joseph Beach states in *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry*, "Nowhere perhaps, in the range of poetry written

in English, is the thought of nature more confidently called to the support and inspiration of the spirit” (370). Whitman relies on night as a part of the natural world that provides a physical immersion into darkness and “anything else restrained by daylight” (DLS 137); the limitless darkness is depicted in Whitman’s “A Clear Midnight” as follows:

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
 Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,
 Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes
 thou lovest best,
 Night, sleep, death and the stars.

The title of the poem indicates midnight as the “hour” that the soul is free from the agitations of day. Traditionally viewed as “intense darkness or gloom” (OED), midnight is also regarded as a time during the night to acknowledge “night thoughts,” which in literature, is symbolic of “the traditional time for meditation and study, for ‘burning the midnight oil,’ and hence for melancholy” (Ferber 138). Whitman highlights how themes of “Night, sleep, death, and the stars” are themes that the soul loves best, which the soul can only engage with during hours of night, specifically midnight in this poem. The soul has an affinity for night because the darkness of night has no boundaries. In the dark, an individual is encouraged to expand, explore and question the norm, which is why the creative mind of a poet like Whitman is so attracted to the benefits of dark themes night nurtures.

Whitman further depicts his experience with night in “Youth, Day, Old Age and Night,” referring to night as “restoring darkness” (8). Ironically, sleep is an essential part to life, but also a main reason why the majority of society never knows the night. As a restoration of day, the hours within night also imply as an escape from day. Night remains an important time to

experience melancholy by encouraging navigation of the dark side of the soul that would otherwise remain obscured by the light of day. Addressing this concept, author Chet Raymo suggests, “Perhaps, it is only in the dark times that the pale light of intelligence, going out from the eye, can make its way in the world without being washed away by the fierce light of the sun. Perhaps it is only in the dark times that the eye and the mind, turning to each other, can cooperate in the delicate and impassioned art of seeing” (20). Raymo’s observations support the use of night as the natural setting of melancholy, providing darkness as a way of seeing that requires both the eyes and mind. Raymo implies that this kind of dark sight enables contemplation in ways that allow for new intelligence to be “seen” that would normally be repressed by restrictions of daylight.

Illuminating the melancholic experience through night imagery, Whitman confronts readers with an experience of what accepting the chaos of nature can do for perception of the mind and soul. The Romantic belief in the universe as “fundamentally chaotic” accepts experiences of a chaotic world as an endless cycle of deconstruction and inspiration for new creation that results “in a never-ending process that becomes an analogue for life itself” (Mellor 4-5); Night as the deconstruction of day in order to restore the mind with new creation is accepting the entirety of nature. Whitman created his own term “Kosmos” to describe his opinion of an idyllic interaction with the universe, specifying the way he believes a person should view the surrounding cosmos. In *Collage of Myself*, Miller notes that Whitman, “defined the term explicitly in his “Words” notebook, demonstrating that he was using the word with care and specificity in his 1855 references in *Leaves*: ‘Kosmos, noun, masculine or feminine, a person who[se] scope of mind, or whose range in a particular science, includes all, the whole known universe’” (145). Whitman emphasizes how a person’s “scope of mind” must experience all

aspects of life to be able to properly confront and interpret the world, an important element necessary to understanding his poetry. Similarly to melancholia, Whitman's poem "Kosmos" advocates for the embrace of life and death, observing, "The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable together" (17); as well as a Whitman's description of person's ability as kosmos to be, "'hungry for equals night and day'" (Miller 146). An example of how Whitman believes a "kosmos," views the world, is seen in the speaker's ability in "Night on the Prairies," to be the interpreter of "great thoughts of space and eternity," (15). Whitman suggests from his invention of "kosmos" that he requires his reader of *Leaves of Grass* to adopt the mind of a kosmos, which encourages the reader to be open to embrace of opposites, a concept of the melancholic mindset.

The starry night sky provides a unique visual of the past and the future in space together, a concept appreciated by a kosmos, according to Whitman. In "Night on the Prairies," Whitman depicts the infinitude of the stars as the speaker's simultaneous confrontation with the mortality of humanity:

How plenteous! How spiritual! How resumé!

The same Old Man and Soul - the same old aspirations, and the same content.

I was thinking the day most splendid, till I saw what the not-day exhibited,

I was thinking this globe enough, till there sprang out so noiseless around me

myriads of other globes. (8-12)

Night as "not-day" exposes the speaker to the history of humanity, "The same Old Man and Soul," that can only be seen in the starry night sky. The stars present the past, "a repository of

human culture” as Raymo describes, which Whitman depicts as the speaker’s melancholic confrontation with mortality. Further, the speaker finds joy in the new knowledge this confrontation of mortality inspires, the “myriads of other globes,” that are suddenly possible from viewing the stars—a personal experience of Whitman’s that he believes possible for every American observing the stars. In this way, the starry night sky, only accessible during the night, provides a unique experience of melancholy, as the stars not only represent past generations of humanity, but inspiration to embrace the potential of the present and contribute to the future of humanity’s story in the stars.

The unique advantages of the night that Whitman highlights as beneficial for melancholic contemplation, like fear, death, and darkness, contribute to society’s banishment of melancholy to the hours of night, but also why writers continue to seek “night thoughts.” Night as “not-day” as Whitman describes allows the refuge of night as a way of escaping society in general. The speaker in Whitman’s “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” experiences the peace night provides from daily societal norms, as follows:

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the
 lecture-room,
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars. (1-11)

The dark cover of night not only allows for contemplative freedom in the unrestricted darkness, but also an emotional freedom from boundaries and restrictions of society during the day. In Whitman's poem, the people applauding in the lecture-room metaphorically represent society: the applause as the majority's approval and the confines of the lecture room as the restrictions daylight normally imposes. The speaker feels "tired and sick" within the "society" of the lecture-room full of people who applaud the astronomer but from within the confine of the lecture room, have yet to actually experience the night sky. Upon viewing the sky, the anxiety of the speaker is set free into the darkness of night; an experience of emotional freedom and rest for mind and soul outside the walls of society. Just as in "Night on the Prairies," both speakers must personally experience the night in order to know that the escape from the expectations of day can offer restorative benefits, which is how Whitman presents aspects of melancholy through night imagery to his audience.

In "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," Whitman hints at the inability for science, "the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure," (4-5) to represent ultimate truth, instead retreating to his individual interaction with the night to make his own conclusions. From this, Whitman implies the importance of individual thought within society and his rejection to accept societal norms, like fearing the darkness of night and melancholy. Prior to publishing his first draft of *Leaves of Grass*, a reviewer observed Whitman's actions as: "he retreated from the public world to receive inspiration, and there are relatively few remaining manuscripts of the poems in the first edition of *Leaves*, leading many to believe that they emerged in a fury of inspiration" (Folsom and Price "Walt Whitman"). Whitman was able to be the original, provocative poet that he was because of his rejection and questioning of the norms within

society, consequently allowing for him to know the night, darkness, melancholy, and as the reviewer indicates, “receive inspiration” from his experiences to create *Leaves of Grass*.

Night provided Whitman the escape from the restrictions of day that allowed for freedom to be melancholic, thus his night imagery represents his expression of personal melancholy for his audience of *Leaves of Grass*. The poetry of Whitman and the philosophy of Wilson, Ficino, etc. demonstrate the necessity of night to experience moods of melancholy, and thus, creativity. Unfortunately, our society is in the process of eradicating night from our world. Naturalist and writer, Henry Beston observes in his book, *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod*, “With lights and ever more lights, we drive the holiness and beauty of the night back to the forests and the sea; the little villages, the crossroads even, will have none of it. Are modern folk, perhaps, afraid of the night?” (165). Published in 1928, what Beston observed then has become an exponentially bigger problem. Now, the little villages and crossroads that Beston speaks of are cities and major roadways that continue to demand more lights. We live in a “progressive” age in which we use artificial lights at night to illuminate the darkness so we can continue to do activities that were previously restricted to the daylight hours. By lighting every corner of darkness, society is able to avoid night altogether and, therefore, able to avoid feeling the undesirable emotion of fear.

Beston realized the imbalance the absurdity of artificial lights would cause between night and day, arguing for the preservation of the balance that night provided as “the true other half of the day’s tremendous wheel...” (166). However intentionally, Beston perfectly describes the aspects unique to night that inspires melancholic creativity:

Learn to reverence night and to put away the vulgar fear of it, for, with the banishment of night from the experience of man, there vanishes as well a religious

emotion, a poetic mood, which gives depth to the adventure of humanity. By day, space is one with the earth and with man—it is his sun that is shining, his clouds that are floating past; at night, space is his no more. When the great earth, abandoning day, rolls up the deeps of the heavens and the universe, a new door opens for the human spirit, and there are few so clownish that some awareness of the mystery of being does not touch them as they gaze. For a moment of night we have a glimpse of ourselves and of our world islanded in its stream of stars—pilgrims of mortality, voyaging between horizons across eternal seas of space and time. Fugitive though the instant be, the spirit of man is, during it, ennobled by a genuine moment of emotional dignity, and poetry makes its own both the human spirit and experience. (173-134)

Beston asserts that the night—its darkness, the stars, the universe—is an experience that can open new doors for the soul that simply cannot open during the day, naturally leading to poetic inspiration. The mystery that the darkness of night brings to the earth challenges humanity's known perceptions of day, an adventure into the unknown that Beston advocates as undeniably worthy of acknowledgment by the mind and soul. Beston argues that only night can offer this kind of "awareness of the mystery" of the universe, and only "few so clownish" could ignore it. Like Raymo and Whitman, Beston also describes the stars as humanity's visual representation of the narrative of humanity, the "pilgrims of mortality" that have been and will remain the evidence of "ourselves." Ironically, society fears the night, yet within the starry night sky the history of our very being shines—resilient—in the darkness.

Paul Bogard addresses Beston's question of why modern people are lighting up the night, in his exploration of some of the brightest and darkest night skies in our world in his book, *The*

End of Night: Searching for Natural Darkness in an Age of Artificial Light. Beston wonders if people are afraid of the night, so Bogard investigated to see if lighting up the night makes night safer. Bogard found that a growing number of lighting engineers, lighting designers, astronomers, physicians, and police are beginning to agree that “often the amount of light we’re using – and how we’re using it – goes far beyond true requirements of safety, and that when it comes to lighting, darkness, and security we tend to assume as common sense ideas that, in truth, are not so black and white” (67). Bogard observes society’s designation of dark as bad and light as good, commenting on the still prevalent fear humanity feels during the night, which may, in part, stem from the historical association of all positive aspects of life with light, consequently banishing all the undesirable themes of life to the darkness of night. It is unsurprising after observing our culture’s tendency to see in black and white that modern society would fear darkness, rather than admit an existence of grey area where light and dark interact.

There are many reasons that society may be afraid of the dark, from the fear of crime to the ancient rejection of all themes associated with darkness. However, Bogard concludes that using artificial lights to make humanity feel safer at night only creates the illusion of safety: “the term ‘security lighting’ is simply oxymoronic because it assumes a link between security and lighting that research does not support. In 1977, a U.S. Department of Justice report found that ‘there is no statistically significant evidence that street lighting impacts the level of crime’” (77). Citing evidence that contradicts one of society’s main concerns with the night, Bogard finds that lighting up our night skies creates the façade of safety; an illusion society is apparently more willing to accept than darkness. Bogard interviewed Paris exterior lighter François Jousse who stated, “‘everything doesn’t necessarily have to be lit. On the contrary, it’s when you leave things

in shadows that you see the light better” (62). As Bogard observes, more lighting at night does not equate a safer night, in fact, the use of darkness helps to see light more clearly.

With the introduction of electricity into most American homes by the mid-1950s Bogard refers to the unfortunate fulfillment of Boston’s early forewarning the potential consequences from the increasing use of lights at night (9). Now, “According to the World Atlas of the Artificial Night Sky Brightness, created in 2001 by Italians Pierantonio Cinzano and Fabio Falchi, two-thirds of the world’s population—including 99 percent of people living in the continental United States and western Europe—no longer experience a truly dark night, a night untouched by artificial light” (Bogard 25). The darkness and the stars available to poets like Whitman and decades of historic writers enabled melancholic experiences of a “truly dark night,” which intended to be relatable to the American culture. Currently, most of modern society does not experience a dark night, severely impeding on the natural hours that writers have always sought after and embraced as the time to be melancholic.

Access to a certain level of darkness is also essential to seeing stars, or enough for cosmic wonder. Bogard quotes American astronomer Bob Berman’s belief that viewers of the night sky must see four hundred fifty stars at once, a sky dimmer than third magnitude, in order to reach the feeling of infinitude. The, “tipping point where people will look and there will be that planetarium view. And now you’re touching that ancient core, whether it’s collective memories or genetic memories or something else from way back before we were human” (34). The “third magnitude” of darkness that skies must be in order to see this volume of stars is based on amateur astronomer John Bortle’s scale that rates different classes of darkness in the night sky, with Class 9 skies representing the brightest and Class 1 representing the darkest (9). According to Berman, only skies that are dimmer than Class 3 can inspire the feeling of infinitude so

essential to the appreciation of night, yet that is the magnitude of darkness that artificial light renders impossible to achieve (qtd. in Bogard 34). Apparently, the majority of the population never experiences the level of darkness needed to appreciate the stars, see “infinity,” and feeling of “smallness” that is imperative for seeing the “ancient core” of humanity in the stars. The current population can therefore not realize, and may never know, the benefit of a truly dark night sky that enables stars to light up the darkness, a historic visual of humanity and inspiration for melancholic contemplation.

Writers like Whitman, even writers fifty years ago, were able to experience Class Three night skies and were able to feel the emotional and intellectual benefits of witnessing melancholy from the darkness and stars this way. The experience of the night sky by writers of that period is thus vastly different than writers today. Even in his time, Beston writes, “to-days civilization is full of people who have not the slightest notion of the character or the poetry of night, who have never even seen night” (166). Whitman advocates for individual experience of the night in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” when the speaker cannot know the night from the words an astronomer, but must venture out alone into the darkness to truly understand the night. Bogard also explores the impact the diminishing of night will have on our culture, noting “Remarkably, estimates are that eight out of every ten children born in American today will never know ‘what it means.’ That is, 80 percent will never know a night dark enough that they can see the Milky Way” (268). With the majority of our population having never experienced a level of darkness within the night to be able to see the stars in the way that Whitman did, even common references in literature will lose meaning. The ever-increasing amount of artificial light indicates a reduction of our culture’s understanding of creative expression, contemplation, and even physical benefits uniquely offered by the night and melancholy.

Whitman describes the soul's favorite themes as, "Night, sleep, death and the stars," and Beston refers to night as "it is beauty, it is fulfillment, it is rest" (166). Neither author could have predicted just how significantly the introduction of artificial lights impacts the restful qualities so highly valued of night. Bogard refers to new research that has shown that "humans are highly sensitive, and that in fact when it comes to disrupting our sleep, confusing our circadian rhythms, and impeding our body's production of the darkness hormone melatonin, LAN [light at night] has the power to dramatically—negatively—affect our body's ancient codes" (94). Artificial light at night makes our brain think that it is daytime and subdues the body's production of melatonin, which is only produced by the body in the dark. Without melatonin being produced at proper time during night, restful sleep is consequently harder to obtain.

In addition to a multitude of now abundant sleeping problems, there are studies that show convincing evidence that "...melatonin plays a key role in keeping these types [hormone-induced] cancers from growing. Light from the moon, stars, candles, or fire—none of these are bright enough to cause this disruption. Only electric light does the trick" (Bogard 104). The increasing amount of artificial lights upsets the balance between night and day in our physical world, as well as in our internal clock, enough to cause serious illnesses. The restful element of night found to be so restorative to writers like Whitman and Beston is yet another part of night that we are repressing with the illumination of our nights.

As a society, are we chasing away physical darkness with artificial lights, as well as repressing the darkness within our souls. American culture's fear of melancholy rejects "an essential part of a full life" (Wilson 6). Our culture is only too eager to shy away from darkness at every opportunity, to prescribe a pill, turn on a light, or fake a smile. Wilson argues this is for

fear of embracing melancholic themes perceived as anxiety provoking, particularly death.

Bogard notes our culture's rejection of death in *The End of Night*: "...when it comes to human death, my culture hides it as much as possible, treating it similarly to melancholy or sadness, or darkness—a subject to be avoided, rather than a part of human life as natural as the moons and the tides" (181). Bogard highlights the natural balances of life that society labors to suppress, avoiding unpleasant subjects by constantly striving for happiness and driving away darkness with the flip of a switch. It appears that our society is determined to eliminate the night, thereby eliminating every negative emotion or theme associated with it.

What modern society doesn't understand is why people like Wilson, Whitman, Beston, and Bogard would advocate for darkness, physically and emotionally. Recent studies exploring the possible answers to this mystery found the link between "negative emotions" and creativity as positively correlated with enhanced artistic creativity. The attempt to "cure" melancholic emotions is ironically challenged by the empirical data found in Modupe Akinola and Wendy Berry Mendes's recent study, "The Dark Side of Creativity: Biological Vulnerability and Negative Emotions Lead to Greater Artistic Creativity," an experiment that found the historical connection between negative emotions and artistic creativity has observable benefits. Akinola and Mendes explored, "individual differences and situational factors related to creativity. We show that when individuals are biologically vulnerable to experiencing negative affect and are exposed to a situation that brings about intense negative emotion, they show the most artistic creativity" ("Intro"). Research analyzed in Akinola and Mendes's study has observed that creative writers are historically individuals who are the most highly susceptible to the negative emotions referred to in this study ("Individual Differences in Creativity"). Further, Akinola and Mendes analyze other studies that have found, "Clinical, empirical, and biographical studies of

creative individuals have shown that those in the creative arts suffer from significantly higher rates of mood disorders compared to matched controls, and mood disorders are 8 to 10 times more prevalent in writers and artists than the general population” (“Individual Differences in Creativity”). Writers are observed to have a much higher probability of experiencing negative emotions that result in creativity, which is why writers would seek melancholy to inspire more creative literature. This research further supports why famous writers and creative minds would dare to embrace negative emotions when the rest of the population adamantly shied away from it.

In Akinola and Mendes’s study, the contextual situation and emotional state also impacted creativity differently from positive and negative emotions (“Emotional Influences on Creativity”). This supports Kaufmann’s previous assertion that creativity cannot be explained solely from a positive state of mind, and that a negative state of mind may provide a unique contribution to creativity that differs from the effects of positive emotions. The results of Akinola and Mendes’s study found “social rejection resulted in greater artistic creativity than did the social approval or nonsocial situations” (“Results”). This necessity to being removed from society is comparable to the removal of the speakers from society into the night in Whitman’s poems, “Night on the Prairies” and “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.” As a reviewer noted, Whitman himself had to retreat from society in order to be inspired for his creation of *Leaves of Grass*.

In addition to social rejection, Akinola and Mendes make further inferences from their study and evaluation of other relevant studies on the connection between depressive emotions and creativity. Akinola and Mendes observed that people who are more prone to negative emotional states may achieve enhanced creativity “because negative emotions produced powerful introspection and detailed thinking...these data do show strong effects for negative

emotional responses (both dispositionally and situationally) in enhancing creativity” (“Discussion”). Building off of increasing historical and scientific evidence that correlates negative emotions and creativity, Akinola and Mendes’s study indicates that negative emotions, impacted both by situational and mental factors, does result in “powerful introspection and detailed thinking” and “enhanced creativity.” Thus, Akinola and Mendes have provided empirical evidence for society that, at the very least, indicates that negative emotions have observable value for humanity by enhancing creativity in a way that positive emotions cannot.

The data from these studies also supports the inadequate definition of melancholia’s formal association with depression in the DSM-5, as well as the psychiatric and societal view of melancholia as an illness—at least in regard to the creativity that is possible from negative emotional states. Studies are presenting an increasing amount of evidence that negative emotions are, in fact, beneficial for creativity in the mind. Additionally, Akinola and Mendes cite research that suggests “deactivating mood states” like sadness and depression can affect creativity differently than “activating” mood states of fear or happiness, and are “believed to enhance creative fluency and originality through enhanced perseverance” (“Emotional Influences on Creativity”). In this way, “deactivating” emotional states are not representative of mental deactivation, but rather, the deconstruction that is needed in order to re-construct in a new way. The different, yet equally beneficial, contribution that deactivating and activating moods have on creativity is another comparable example of the emotional balance that melancholic mood provides for writers. Feeling both positive and negative emotions allows for the entire spectrum of emotions to be felt, thus optimal creative benefits, as this study observes.

Wilson’s description of the melancholic mood as “active questioning” and “perpetual longing to create new ways of being and seeing” relates well to the process of “enhanced

perseverance” that negative emotions offer for creativity, as Akinola and Mendes’s study presents. The melancholic mood can therefore be described as a determined process that writers will endure in order to express original works of creativity. Observing the negative state of mind in this way further distinguishes the difference between melancholia and depression by demonstrating how active the mind is during melancholic moods, whereas depression is total paralysis of the mind, unable to persevere. The study of how negative emotions contribute a different kind of creativity to the mind suggests that society’s shunning of melancholy is simply unnecessary.

After the time period in which Whitman produced *Leaves of Grass*, Beach observes that the nation’s original, creative literature began to decline. Beach writes, “It is as if a great wariness had come over the literary mind, making it loath to grapple with cosmic problems, including the problem of man’s place in nature...Earth and the stars are now regarded as scenery, setting; or they are regarded as objects of scientific study” (547). In Whitman’s poetry, he dares to find meaning in his own experiences in nature as a “kosmo.” Whitman depicted the Earth and stars as more than just scenery: at night, the stars represent the past, present, and future of humanity, and the earth becomes a vast, unknown darkness to allow the mind and soul to test new propositions. Whitman used nature in order to avoid the strict knowledge that science enforces, instead preferring contemplation of the elements of the universe that still remain a mystery: “night, sleep, death, and the stars” (6). The night that Whitman was able to experience is true darkness that provides unique access to melancholic contemplation, a duel experience that will be diminished by the increasing presence of artificial lights during the night.

Wilson notes that society’s repression of emotional darkness stems from the historic fear of contemplation of dark themes like depression and death. As Wilson has observed, rather than

fear the death, melancholy ironically views death as “an invitation to seize the day...” (44). Melancholia embraces the anguish and pain felt by the awareness of morality to uplift the spirit to fully engage in the world and create beauty (131). Without melancholy, Wilson argues, “we would live in a world in which everyone simply accepted the status quo, in which everyone would simply be content with the given” (150). Wilson suggests that this dystopian picture of the world is created by society’s historic fear to accept darkness, a fear that is now restricting society from living a full life. Yet, authors like Wilson continue to fight for the benefits and existence of melancholy, which scientific studies are beginning to support with empirical evidence. Negative moods inspire creativity in a way that positive emotions cannot. Together all emotional moods—positive and negative, light and dark, happiness and sadness—must combine for writers to know the full potential of creativity.

The grey area in which melancholic contemplation takes place allows for “new ways of being and seeing” that Wilson notes as the joy of melancholy: a constant source of inspiration for creativity. Whitman depicts his own melancholy through night imagery in his night poetry, portraying the darkness of night as the balance to the light of day, sadness to happiness, death to life. Specifically, the darkness of night provides freedom for the mind in order to be restored for the day and the starry night sky presents the history of humanity in the stars, resulting in ironic inspiration. Without the night’s unique setting of darkness that allows an individual to embrace melancholy, the historic humor “sympathetic to the night,” the opportunity for an individual to be in the darkness and contemplate darker themes of life will greatly be reduced. The hours of night provide freedom to be in a darker emotional state within a culture that represses emotions associated with melancholy. Our culture’s dual obsession with light and happiness is threatening the experience of night’s darkness, thus, threatening the natural time to experience melancholy.

Instead of banishing melancholy and the night in favor of daylight and happiness, society needs to reestablish the natural balance of opposites by embracing the darker side of life to restore the experience of darkness to the night for all of humanity, particularly writers, to allow for the continued experience of melancholic creativity.

“Creation is here and now...Poetry is as necessary to comprehension as science. It is as impossible to live without reverence as it is without joy.” (Beston 216-217)

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