When I heard the Learn’d Astronomer

By: Walt Whitman

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Transcendentalism

- Transcendentalism is a philosophy that began in the 1830’s
- It started and was most popular in New England
- Transcendentalism entails that the ideal spiritual state should be attained by individual thinking, not by religion or science
- Walt Whitman was one of the most prominent Transcendentalists in the Northeast
Walt Whitman

- Walt Whitman was born in 1819 on Long Island
- Whitman wrote *When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer* in 1865
- Whitman generally does not use any form of rhyme scheme or meter in his poems
How the Poems Approaches Transcendentalism

- *Learn’d Astronomer* quite clearly addresses the Transcendentalist Ideology, specifically how it emphasizes the human being, and not science.

- First it shows the scientific perspective, using the words “charts”, “diagrams” and “columns”.

- The poem also shows that the scientific approach was rather popular at the time, noting there was “much applause” when the astronomer was lecturing.
Pro-Transcendentalist Ideas

- Subject becomes disinterested in Science
- Leaves “by (him)self”
- Looks at the night sky from a worldly perspective, not a scientific one
What is juxtaposition?

**Juxtaposition** - an act or instance of placing two things close together or side by side. This is often done in order to compare/contrast the two, to show similarities or differences.
Where is Juxtaposition in poem?

- Two ideas juxtaposed

- Explain stars through charts and diagrams and math but, "I became tired and sick;"

- Looking at stars, "look'd up in perfect silence at the stars"
Deeper Meanings

- Many ideas conveyed with this comparison:
  - Simpler things are better; something's in life should be kept simple, and shouldn't be over analyzed, but when it comes to important issues we should slow down and we should analyze that problem thoroughly in order to come to good conclusion/outcome.
  - Stars are supposed to remain mysterious, for star-gazers to wonder and admire.
Structural Components

- Rhyme Scheme
- Meter
- Stress pattern

They are not in this poem, it is only a message.
Other Poetic Categories

- This poem is not about a single object or event, but a way of thought.

- This poem has no rhyme scheme and few sound devices.

- There is no form followed in this poem.

- This one expresses the author’s faith in an almost religious viewpoint, not an outlook on something that is unique to only Walt Whitman.
Figurative Language

- Metaphor: Line 6 “gliding out”
- Alliteration: Line 7 “mystical moist”
- Anaphora: Lines 1-4 “when…”
- Consonance: Line 1 “heard the learn’d”
Learn’d

- Knowledgeable astronomer

- Written in a way that doesn’t give too much importance to the astronomer

- Person doesn’t seem to care that the Astronomer is this intellectual smart person.
Much Applause/By Myself

- Many people praise knowledge and improvement.

- On the other hand, the person who got up and left who isn’t interested in science and Development is left alone.
Person didn’t feel responsible for the things that the Astronomer had to present.

Showed no interest at all.

Gliding - makes the reader understand that the conscience of the person wasn’t holding him back from leaving the progressed world to go to the world outside without any development.
Mystical Moist Night Air

- When the person goes outside and leaves the progressed world, the writer describes the night as mystical.

- In a world where there is no progress, things are vague without any meaning, mysterious, and difficult to be understood.
From time to time look’d up

- This expression makes a reader understand that the person doesn’t know what to do
- He is wandering and he is confused
- He doesn’t know which world to join; the improved world or unimproved world
Questions

- What is the main belief of transcendentalism?
- Why is “Astronomer” a transcendentalist poem?
- What is one literary device used in this poem, and how?
- What two ideas are juxtaposed in the poem?
- Do transcendentalist poems follow a certain format, and if so, what is it?