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ENGLISH

CHAPTER 7: ANIMALS



ANIMALS

~Summary~

-by Walt Whitman

Stanza- 1

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are
so placid and self-contain'd
I stand and look at them long and long.

Explanation: The poet here desires to turn into an animal and live with them as he is impressed by their calmness and the purity of their mind. Unlike humans, animals seem so contained with their lives and are happy in their natural surroundings. The simple lives of animals help them maintain self-control and their rationality. He stands and looks at them for a long time. In the phrase "long and long" the implied meaning is the longing that the poet feels for these two qualities in human beings.

Stanza- 2

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,

Explanation: The poet is quite happy with the fact that animals do not make complaints and cry about their conditions like humans. They eat and sleep peacefully as they have nothing to worry about, while humans, because of their wrong actions are unable to do so and thus cannot sleep without worrying about them. Humans, even after committing sins, talk about God and rightness, while animals are simple creatures and they do not need to worry about praying to God. The poet here means that since animals are so pure, they do not pray to God for forgiveness or ask God to fulfil their desires like humans.

Stanza- 3

Not one is dissatisfied,
not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another,
nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

Explanation: Animals do not possess material things like humans and they are happy and satisfied without all the worldly items, the desire of which has affected human beings very badly. This desire to own things has been called madness by the poet. Animals are free from the habit of praying to their ancestors. When the poet says 'not one is respectable' he means that since all of them are equal, there is no question of respect to some and insult to others. All these features of animals make them happy and uncomplaining.

Stanza- 4

So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself,
they evince them plainly in their possession
I wonder where they get those tokens,
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?

Explanation: The poet feels that animals represent human beings in some way. This means that animals seem to have what humans once had, i.e. virtues like kindness, self-containment and innocence. They symbolise the lost values of the human race. He believed that civilisation has corrupted human beings and instead of teaching values to them, it has taught them greed. He believes in this poem that humans dropped these virtues a long time ago and have forgotten them.

Conclusion of Animals

In the poem 'Animals', the poet Walt Whitman admires the animals for being better than human beings. He praises them also for possessing all such qualities that humans lack or have forgotten.

NCERT SOLUTION

Questions (Page No. 84)

(THINKING ABOUT THE POEM)

Question 1: Notice the use of the word 'turn' in the first line, "I think I could turn and live with animals...". What is the poet turning from?

Answer: The poet is turning away from human beings to live with animals because he thinks animals are calm, self-contained and have a non-complaining nature. On the contrary, he feels humans are complicated and false in comparison to animals.

Question 2: Mention three things that humans do and animals don't.

Answer: According to the poet, here we outline the three things that humans do and animals don't:

1. Humans complain about small things and are always dissatisfied. On the other hand, animals are non-complaining creatures who are satisfied with whatever they have.
2. Human beings sweat and work hard to earn their living and they whine about their condition always whereas, animals are placid creatures and do not sulk about their condition at any time.
3. Humans are fond of materialistic things as this makes them happy. On the contrary, animals are non-demanding creatures and do not behave irrationally to possess worldly pleasures.

Question 3: Do humans kneel to other humans who lived thousands of years ago? Discuss this in groups.

Answer: Yes, humans kneel to other humans who lived thousands of years ago due to cultural traditions or religious beliefs. They fold their hands in humility and worship their ancestors to show respect by kneeling down in front of their portraits.

(Note: Students can discuss and share their own cultural beliefs with their classmates and also be aware of religious practices of other cultures at the same time.)

Question 4: What are the 'tokens' that the poet says he may have dropped long ago, and which the animals have kept for him? Discuss this in class. (Hint: Whitman belongs to the Romantic tradition that includes Rousseau and Wordsworth, which holds that civilization has made humans false to their own true nature. What could be the basic aspects of our nature as living beings that humans choose to ignore or deny?)