

# MAY SWENSON'S EXPLORATION OF EXISTENCE AND PURPOSE

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## RESEARCH QUESTION

- How does May Swenson Explore Existence and Purpose Through Poetry?
- What does Swenson urge her readers to do in order to make the most of this life?

What

is it about,

the universe,

the universe about us stretching out?

We, within our brains,

within it,

think

we must unspin

the laws that spin it.

We think why

because we think

because.

Because we think,

we think

the universe about us.

But does it think,

the universe?

Then what about?

About us?

If not,

must there be cause

in the universe?

Must it have laws?

And what

if the universe

is not about us?

Then what?

What

is it about?

And what

about us?

# “THE UNIVERSE”



## QUESTIONING EXISTENCE



## HUMAN-CENTERED UNIVERSE

- **Anthropomorphism**
  - the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal, or object.
- Human experiencing life, or life experiencing a human?
- **Ecocentrism**
  - term used in ecological political philosophy to denote a nature-centered, as opposed to human-centered system



“THE  
UNIVERSE”

## “THE UNIVERSE”

- The Poet is Antispecialist-
  - “The universe inside and out, is properly its laboratory. More plain than ever before is the potent fact that we are human particles in a culture of living change. We must either master the Great Whirl or become victims of it.” (Swenson 688).
- We must play an active part

“EVOLUTION”

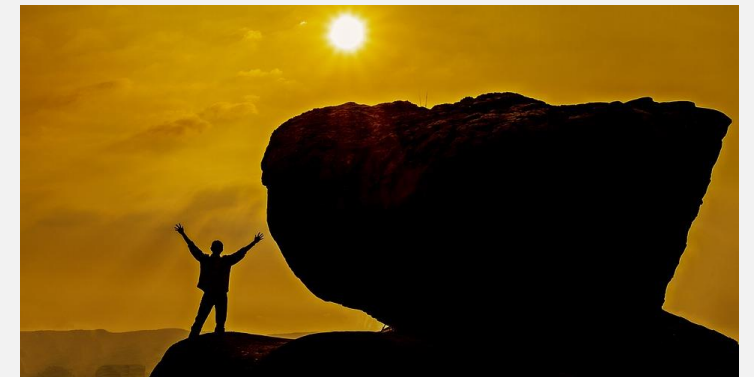
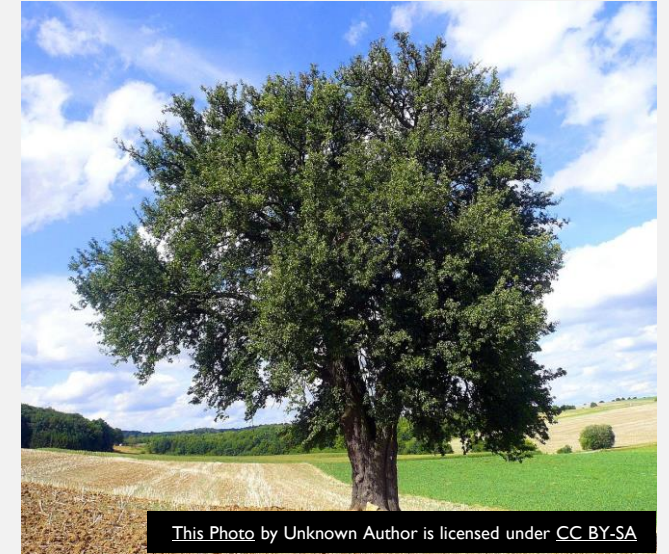
Perception

Relationships

Creation

# “EVOLUTION”

- Anthropomorphism
  - the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal, or object.
- “the stone / would like to be / Alive like me / the rooted tree longs to be Free / the mute beast / envies my fate” (lines 1-7)
- Humans are envied because of their ability to choose-agency
  - “an Evolution strange / two Tongues touch / exchange / a Feast unknown / to stone / or tree or beast”



# “EVOLUTION”

- Ability and Responsibility
- Goodbye Goldeneye-page 442
- Ecocentrism
  - term used in ecological political philosophy to denote a nature-centered, as opposed to human-centered system





# CONCLUSIONS

- Ecocentrism with anthropomorphism
- Christine Gerhardt- Environmental Humility
  - “the willingness to let go of the notion of complete manipulation and control of nature, and the admittance of our limited knowledge of natural processes” (15).
  - “Is based on the simultaneous perception of human beings as interconnected, dependent parts of nature and as existing outside and separate from it, especially in terms of understanding, controlling, and destroying the nonhuman world.” (*A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World*. University of Iowa Press, 2014.)



## CONCLUSIONS

- John Felstiner- Can Poetry Save the Earth?
  - Genesis: “Have dominion...over all the earth.”
  - “Homo sapiens, a recent arrival, has to refigure its place on earth, much as the Copernican revolution upset our geocentric universe. Are we a part or apart? The ways we speak of environmental and ecological concerns reflect these jostling mindsets. Should water and wildland be managed for or protected from people? The word “Environment” centers our surroundings on the human standpoint, leading to “conservation” or “wise use” of “resources” for our benefit. “Ecology,” a more recent term, sees a biosystem of interacting organisms needing “preservation” for the sake of the whole. (5)”

## CONCLUSIONS

- The Poet is Antispecialist-
  - We are the driving force of our destiny and happiness
- Swenson believes that a being's place in the world is dependent on the being's actions
- everyone is given agency and a chance for happiness that will ultimately determine purpose, existence, and life path. When we decide to act by making decisions for our own lives based on our desires, beliefs, and values, we become the master of our own destiny.
- a being's purpose in this existence is to interact and connect with others and the world around us by taking part in symbiotic, mutually beneficial actions not just for the beings but nature as well.

# QUESTIONS, COMMENTS?

- Sources and Additional Information
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