

Every Atom: Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

CLASS SEVEN • Discussion Topics

How to Use:

These discussion questions are based on the video and required reading for each class. You can use them to lead a discussion with your group, or you can use them to think about the class videos and readings on your own. You do not have to use them in the order given below, and you do not have to use all of them. Onward!

1. Can you describe a time that it seemed to you that just looking intensely at some physical thing in the world was more meaningful than anything you have read in a book or heard in a lecture or sermon? What truth was waiting in that thing?
2. By imagining a body produced by the forces of evolution, Whitman illustrates one way that (as he said in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*) scientists are the “lawgivers of poets.” How is a body that is imagined as an evolved thing different from a body that is imagined as a divinely created thing? Is it possible to imagine an evolved body to have been made in the image of God?
3. Many of us project human qualities onto animals, particularly our pets. Whitman seems to reverse this inclination and to find in animals the absence of bothersome qualities he finds in humans. Meanwhile, the traditional boundaries between humans and animals continue to fade with the ongoing discovery of the ways various animals engage in activities like making tools or using language. Do you think animals are becoming perceived to be more like humans, or that humans are increasingly perceived to be more like animals? Is the distinction between “human” and “animal” a function merely of our language, or is there in fact an essential difference?
4. In this section, Whitman records the escape of the passengers and crew from an 1853 shipwreck that took place off the coast of New York when the ship was caught in a gale, and everyone was given up for dead. Whitman describes the terror that the survivors went through, then he concludes: “All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine, / I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there.” The twentieth-century poet James Wright called this final line “one of the noblest lines of poetry ever written.” Do you agree? Is the line an expression of the poet’s ability to fully empathize with the suffering of others, or does the quickness and ease with which the poet absorbs the suffering betray a kind of casualness that undermines empathy and allows the poet to promptly move on to the embracing of yet other experiences?

