

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

CLASS SIX • 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. We usually think of modernism as a long battle between what C. P. Snow in the 1950s called the “two cultures”—the sciences and the humanities, each with different methodologies and different vocabularies that have hindered any real communication between them. Whitman, a hundred years earlier, seemed to be demonstrating a way the two cultures could merge: the humanist would take the scientist’s new discoveries and turn them into a meaningful human message. So Whitman shouts “Hurrah for positive science!” Have poets in your culture followed Whitman’s lead, or have they retreated from scientific discoveries and advancements? Which poets embrace scientific discovery and make poetry out of it? How successful are they?
2. Which poets in your culture have used their voice to give voice to “forbidden voices”? What has made those voices forbidden? Has such poetry had an impact on your culture?
3. In this section, Whitman evokes “Happiness” as the word that comes close to “the meaning of all things,” and he encourages us to “set out in search” of it immediately. This part of the poem seems to echo one of the strangest phrases in the United States “Declaration of Independence,” where Thomas Jefferson wrote that among humans’ “inalienable rights” were “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Why do Jefferson and Whitman emphasize the need to search for or pursue happiness? What does “happiness” mean in the “Declaration of Independence” and “Song of Myself”? “Happiness” is not something we are promised or guaranteed; rather, we are promised the right to “pursue” or “search” for it. Why?
4. How has the catalog of sounds that you hear every day changed for you over the years? How important is each day’s chorus of sounds to your emotional state? Why?
5. Most languages have some set of images that relate humans to clams or oysters or other shelled creatures. In English, we say that someone who won’t talk has “clammed up.” A shy person may “retreat into her shell.” What is the value of such figures of speech? Is Whitman’s assumption that humans live in skin that is continually sensitive to the world true to your experience, or are imagined shells important too?
6. Is the experience of touch that Whitman describes here specific enough that you can relate it to particular experiences you have had? Or is it general enough that it could describe virtually any intense experience of touching someone or something? Which of his images do you find particularly evocative and why?



7. What are the most sensual landscapes you have seen, and what made them seem sensual to you?