

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

CLASS TWO • 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. "I celebrate myself"—this was the first line of the first published version of "Song of Myself," to which Whitman later added the clause, "and sing myself." How does this addition change your understanding of the poem? Why do you think Whitman made such a change?
2. How is it possible not to "take things at second or third hand" or not to "look through the eyes of the dead" or not to "feed on the spectres in books"? Don't we all learn about the world and develop our beliefs by listening to and learning from others, both living and dead?
3. Who are the "talkers" and "discussers" who want to divert our attention from the fullness of the present moment? Is it ever possible to shut them out so that we can fully focus on the moment of "now"?
4. Can you think of times you have felt "both in and out of the game," simultaneously a participant and an observer? What are the advantages and drawbacks of such a dual positioning of the self?
5. Section 5 is simultaneously one of the most physical and one of the most spiritual of all the sections of "Song of Myself." How do you respond to Whitman's insistence that we can only access the vast mystery of creation through the physical body?

