

Whitman's Civil War: Writing and Imaging Loss, Death, and Disaster

CLASS ONE • 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. Human cultures over the centuries have developed various ways to acknowledge, honor, mourn, and memorialize the dead. The rituals of mourning and memorializing work most effectively when the focus of the mourning is a single person. Mass death--brought on by war, natural disaster, or accident--creates a very different challenge, as Whitman demonstrates when he tries to "sum up" the hundreds of thousands dead in the American Civil War. How have modern media tried to cope with mourning, honoring, and memorializing mass death? Is it possible to respect and honor individuals lost in a mass death?
2. Do you read imagined or invented scenes in literature differently from what purports to be direct testimony? Is one more reliable than the other? If so, how and why?
3. What kind of impact do Whitman's "compost" ideas have on you? Do they make you feel larger or smaller, more important or less important, more connected to the earth or less connected, more or less a part of eternity? Or do they do both, and, if so, how?
4. Many people today still look to the stars for fate, prophecy, destiny. Even many who claim not to take astrology seriously still check their horoscopes daily. And, as astronomy has stripped the stars and skies of some of their mystery, it has simultaneously increased the mysteries of the cosmos. We continue to see comets and asteroids as omens of various human or natural events. What is the human relationship to the stars in today's world? What have they come to mean for us, and how do the meanings vary from culture to culture, from generation to generation?
5. Even though Whitman, through his hospital work, became more aware than most of the horrendous brutality and butchery of the Civil War, he nonetheless kept this boisterous first poem, written at the beginning of the war, in his "Drum-Taps" collection. Why did he want to preserve a poem that seems to exult in the sending of young men to a war that would kill hundreds of thousands and maim hundreds of thousands more? What point does the poem make in relation to the poems that follow it?
6. Whitman's use of uniform verses and a steady rhythm in this poem marks it as different from most of the free-verse poetry he is best-known for. He would retreat to more conventional forms at various moments of historical and cultural crisis (as he did when Lincoln was assassinated, with "O Captain! My Captain!"). What is the effect of the steady beat and uniform pattern in "Beat! Beat! Drums!?" If we think of the second half of the nineteenth century as the era when poets began to abandon traditional poetic forms in favor



of all kinds of experimental verse, then why do some of the most radical innovators (like Whitman) return to such forms at disruptive historical moments?