

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

CLASS THREE • 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. Any interior space that we return to over an extended period of time accretes multiple associations—happy memories, sad memories, feelings of loneliness, feelings of friendship, feelings of frustration and feelings of inspiration. Think about one room or building in which you have experienced—as Whitman did at the Patent Office—multiple and conflicting emotions and describe your relationship to that space.
2. Every culture creates rituals to mark significant passages in the lives of individuals and their communities, which writers may describe for posterity. Thus the nineteenth-century American custom of a nightlong vigil for the dead and burial at dawn takes on new meaning when Whitman recreates it on the battlefield and then juxtaposes it with an image of maternal love. Describe two rituals you know well and set them side by side: what do they reveal about the vision of the world you have inherited?
3. Many buildings are repurposed—during wars and other crises, or often more routinely when one owner abandons or sells a property that then becomes something else. Churches become hospitals, warehouses become art studios, old mills become condos, newspaper buildings become restaurants. When this happens, the lingering presence of the old can often still be sensed in the new, creating an odd conflation of purpose and tone (as we see in Whitman's poem, where the functions and senses of the church intermingle with the narrator's experience of the place as a hospital). Think of such a building that you have occupied or visited, and explore how the two contrasting functions create a dissonant or consonant effect, an odd duality of experience.
4. Think of a place—a natural landscape—that you have visited that once was the site of a battle or of mass death. Reflect on the peace and serenity of the present place, and then trouble that placidity by recalling the horrors that took place here years or centuries or even millennia ago. Is all land haunted by the specter of past death? Is the sensation you experience when you reflect on the past death one of relief, sadness, regeneration, horror? Explain.
5. A letter of condolence can take many forms, and though the writer is generally cautioned to keep it short, out of respect for the grieving, there are occasions when more is more. Think back over your attempts to offer solace to someone who has suffered a great loss: is there anything in Whitman's letter to the Haskells that might have helped you find the words to express what he or she meant to you?
6. The kinds of oxymoronic reactions that Whitman had toward the war are some of the most difficult to articulate in words—to express how one can both hate and love the same thing,



find it beautiful and horrifying, sustaining and devastating. Think about an event or an experience that has generated such oxymoronic reactions in you, and describe it in such a way that your reader can feel how it produced such deeply contradictory reactions in you.