

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR IN SEARCH OF WALT WHITMAN

STARTING THE CONVERSATION ON POETRY

- Do you have a favorite poet(s)? What about their poetry moves you?
- What can poetry do that prose cannot? Conversely, what can prose accomplish that poetry cannot? It has been said that prose is like walking while poetry is like flying. What does this analogy mean to you?
- What was your favorite poem presented in the film and why? What about that poem resonated with you?
- It has been said that poetry can both heal and bring joy. What are some examples, in general, of poems that might heal or bring joy?

WHITMAN'S EARLY LIFE

- Was there a particular event or moment in the film that really resonated with you?
- What about Whitman's life surprised you the most?
- The film describes how Whitman had to leave school at age 11 and became an autodidact. How did leaving school at such an early age and teaching himself affect his poetry?
- The documentary shows how Walt moved almost every year with his family, and when he was a young teenager, he lived on his own in Brooklyn. How do you think these early experiences might have shaped his character?
- What was the role Ralph Waldo Emerson played in Whitman's life? Do you think Whitman would have become a famous poet without Emerson's assistance?

POLITICAL VIEWS

- What was Whitman's position on the Mexican-American War? Did he consider it a "just war"? How did this differ from the views of Transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau?

- What was Walt’s view of slavery before the Civil War? What did it mean to join the Free Soil Party? How did their positions differ from the Abolitionists?

WHITMAN’S POETRY

- One of the major questions Part One grapples with is how did an ordinary writer with little formal education or training write the literature-altering masterpiece *Leaves of Grass* in 1855? The film presents the theory of Walt’s close friend, Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, who suggests that Whitman had a transcendent experience in 1853 or 1854 that infused his poetry with profound spiritual wisdom. What do you make of this theory? Do you agree or disagree?
- Whitman was the first major poet to use ordinary language and free verse – he opened up the line, so it was no longer subject to meter and rhyme. Do you think this enhances his poems? If so, how? Or does it detract from them?
- He was also one of the first to write about the common person in his poetry – not just the “elites” of society, such as royalty, aristocracy, or mythological figures. What do you think he was hoping to accomplish in his poetry by doing this, as in his poem “I Hear America Singing”?
- How do you think Whitman’s journalism career influenced his poetry?
- How does Whitman express his disdain for slavery in “I Sing the Body Electric”?
- How does the poet express his higher self in “Song of Myself”?
- One expert in the film notes that “Part of Whitman’s inclusiveness of vision was that the entire body – every part of the body – was crucial...[Whitman] was the first poet with a torso. Before this, poets were always shoulders and heads.” How do you think this inclusiveness of the entire body contributed to poetry after Whitman?
- In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman tries to connect his own time with future generations. How well do you think he succeeds at this?

THE CIVIL WAR

- Much of Part Two centers on the Civil War. Was there some aspect of the war that you learned from the film that you did not know before?
- In Whitman’s poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” how does he express war’s ruthless force that seizes people from their peacetime activities?

- One expert notes that Whitman feared that America would lose the lessons of the war and this was one reason he wrote “The Wound-Dresser.” How effective is the poet in depicting the suffering soldiers, which was a rare topic in poetry at the time? What poetic techniques and imagery does he draw on to make the poem more vivid?
- In “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” the poet never mentions Abraham Lincoln by name, even though the poem is a burial hymn. What effect does this have on the poem and why do you think Whitman chose this technique?
- The film describes a number of letters Walt wrote for sick and injured soldiers recuperating in the hospitals. Is there a particular letter that moved you and why?

LATER POETRY

- In Part Two, we learn about Timber Creek, which Walt frequented in recovering from his two strokes. He credits this quiet place in nature with helping him recuperate? Do you have a “Timber Creek” – a place of refuge that you would like to share?
- Despite his declining health, Walt still continued to write poems. But his poetry changed. How did his later poems differ from his earlier ones?
- In his elegiac poem “Goodbye My Fancy,” Whitman bids farewell to his imagination, or fancy, which served him so well over the decades. How effective is this poem? What is your reaction to it?