

One can see how this sort of chemical thinking could peak Whitman's interest!

"Liebig was especially interested in the cyclical patterns of nature and the ways in which dead matter is converted into new life. When an organism decomposes, Liebig argued, its atoms recombine into different compounds, leading "to the production of a compound which did not before exist in [the body]" (227). In this process, whatever diseases the body had were destroyed. Liebig saw this process as a type of natural resurrection."

This quotation from the Walt Whitman Encyclopedia entry on Liebig summarizes his book's general points:

Whitman to Liebig's ideas about atoms.
application to agriculture and physiology. The book exposed organic chemist Justus Liebig's book *Chemistry in its Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. On June 28th, 1847, Whitman reviewed As a journalist, Whitman wrote book reviews for the

What did Walt Whitman know about chemistry?
1855. Whitman's use of the word "atom" begs the question: "Song of Myself" published in his book *Leaves of Grass* in These are the first three lines of Walt Whitman's poem

**"I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."**
Leaves of Grass (1855)

On the next page is Whitman's poem "This Compost" published in 1856. Pay attention to the type of language Whitman is using as well as the images he has created for you, his attentive and caring reader. What is chemistry for Whitman? What does this greater study of the world represent for him?

A Persian Lesson (1891)

"exception."

**"It is the central urge in every atom,
(Often unconscious, often evil, downfallen,
To return to its divine source and origin, however distant,
Latent the same in subject and in object, without one**

in 1913, much after Whitman's time.)
Bohr Model of the atom seen on the cover was discovered the smallest thing that can be shared and recycled. (The nature of the world. Whitman's atom, in this case, becomes could use to investigate the shared and regenerative The study of chemistry gave Whitman metaphors that he can be an enthusiast, life-devoted, student in this noble science."

essences of creation, and the changes, and the growths, and formations and decays, of so large a constituent part of the earth, and the things thereof! We can well imagine how a man whose judgment leaps over the mere artificial, its capacious recesses. Chemistry—that involves the vulgar think technical, because they have not delved into "Chemistry! the elevating, beautiful study! which only the

In Whitman's published review of Liebig's book, he wrote:

WHITMAN, THE CHEMIST

The third line of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" makes the reader think about the smallest thing she can think of: the atom.

Whitman was less concerned with the specific science of the atom. Instead, he focused on what the atom represents: the smallest thing that exists throughout regeneration and can be shared.

This WhitGuide contains some history about Whitman's exposure to chemistry and a poem he wrote.

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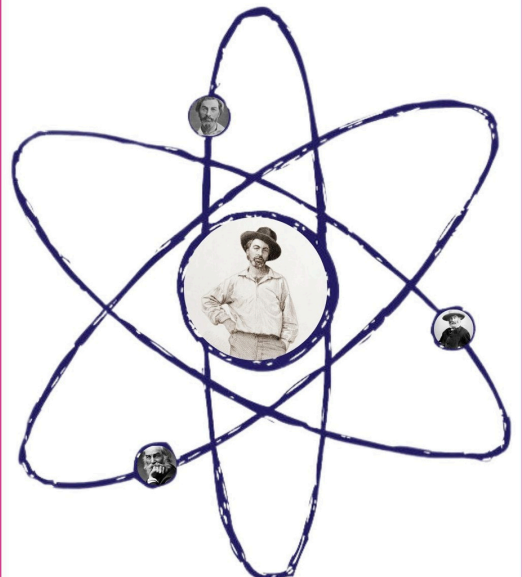
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WHITMAN, THE CHEMIST
A WHITGUIDE

The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow, the colt from the mare,
 Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,
 Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,
 The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.
 What chemistry!
 That the winds are really not infectious,
 That this is no cheat, this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me,
 That it is safe to allow it to lick my naked body all over with its tongues,
 That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it,
 That all is clean forever and forever,
 That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,
 That blackberries are so flavorous and juicy,
 That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me,
 That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,
 Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.
 Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
 It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
 It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseas'd corpses,
 It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
 It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
 It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.

THIS COMPOST

1
 Something startles me where I thought I was safest,
 I withdraw from the still woods I loved,
 I will not go now on the pastures to walk,
 I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea,
 I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me.

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?
 How can you be alive you growths of spring?
 How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?
 Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?
 Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?

Where have you disposed of their carcasses?
 Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations?
 Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat?
 I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv'd,
 I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through the sod and turn it up underneath,
 I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat.

2
 Behold this compost! behold it well!
 Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of a sick person—yet behold!
 The grass of spring covers the prairies,
 The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,
 The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
 The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,
 The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,
 The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,
 The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on their nests,
 The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,



WHITMAN, THE NEW YORKER

WHAT IS HE KNOWN FOR?
 He is known for being one of the first American poets to cultivate an American voice in poetry along with Emily Dickinson. He is also known as the father of free-verse poetry, his lines unrestrained by meter and rhyme.
 Walt Whitman lived in New York City from 1832-1862. He walked many of the same streets that we do today. He also built houses with his father in Brooklyn. He worked as a journalist at the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, and frequented bars in Manhattan.

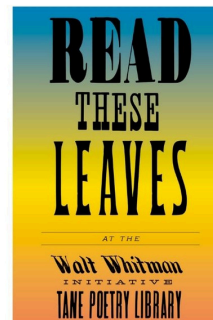
WHO WAS WALT WHITMAN?
 Walt Whitman, (b. May 31st, 1819) was an American poet, journalist, printer, and essayist, and he is best known for his book *Leaves of Grass*. This book of poems was published several times over his lifetime, each edition accruing new poems and edits.

WALT WHITMAN



WALT WHITMAN INITIATIVE

The Walt Whitman Initiative (WWI) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization whose mission is to celebrate and honor New York City's literary legacy, and to serve as an organizing center for cultural activism and poetry-related events. We are an international collective open to all, and seek to foster a sense of community among those interested in the life, work, and influence of Walt Whitman.



TANE POETRY LIBRARY

The Tane Poetry Library is a free, open-source research library located in the Fulton Stall Market in South Street Seaport. We have over 600 volumes of books dedicated to the words and study of Walt Whitman. Visit our website to learn more about how you can access the library.