

The Learn'd Astronomer

by Walt Whitman

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

For the first group

You know the five journalistic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? Help us with the first four--we'll leave the "why" (the poem's purpose) to other groups. So: Who is the speaker? (What kind of person, from what walk of life?) What was he doing during the event he now describes? Where was he? When was he there?

For the second group

How would you say astronomers generally understand and describe the stars? What specific words and phrases does the speaker use to characterize that way of understanding the stars? If you find the speaker's descriptive phrases in lines 1-4 "loaded," say how.

For the third group

What effect does the astronomer's lecture have upon the speaker? Concentrate on the last four lines, beginning "How soon . . ." Go beyond the obvious, which is that the speaker doesn't like the lecture and so he leaves. How exactly does he seem to feel, and how exactly does he describe his departure from the room and his subsequent actions?

For the fourth group

You've been appointed the class philosophers for a day. (Don't fret; it's at least marginally better than being the court jester.) Contrast the differing ideas about human nature held by the scientist in the poem and the speaker, respectively. The question perhaps boils down to this: what kind of "knowledge" most satisfies human beings? What, according to Whitman, do they need to know or feel when they look at the stars?

For the fifth group

You've been appointed the class romantics for a day. Now then, a cynic might say, isn't Whitman himself, as a poet, doing what the astronomer did--isn't he using mere words to lecture us about the stars? And we thought the speaker implied that silence--not words or charts--was the only proper comeback to the scientific view! Help! Can you make Whitman's case that poetic words offer a better way of understanding ourselves and the natural world than does science?