



The Scholé Way with Christopher Perrin

Lecture 4: Contemplation
and Learning: Walt
Whitman's "When I
Heard the Learn'd
Astronomer"

Outline:

In this lesson, Dr. Christopher Perrin explores Walt Whitman's poem "When I Heard the Learned Astronomer" as a meditation on different modes of learning. Drawing a parallel to the biblical story of Martha and Mary, he considers how Whitman contrasts analytical, lecture-based knowledge with contemplative, experiential understanding.

"You can measure a star, but can you love a star without having first gazed upon it, perhaps in a kind of perfect silence?"

Whitman's Poem as an Exercise in Contemplation

- Introduction to the poem and its purpose in this lesson
- Encouragement to recite the poem multiple times before analyzing
- The importance of sound, rhythm, and repetition in poetry

Analyzing the Structure and Contrast in the Poem

- The first four lines: structured, analytical, filled with proofs and lectures
- The second four lines: a shift in mood and method—experiential, contemplative
- The poet's movement from sitting and listening to rising, gliding, and seeing
- The contrast between lecture-based learning and direct perception

Comparison to the Martha and Mary Story

- Martha as the busy, active worker vs. Mary as the contemplative listener
- How Whitman's poem echoes this contrast in modes of knowing



- The question of whether both approaches are necessary in education

Learning Through Contemplation

- The role of silence and perception in true understanding
- The poet's journey from hearing about stars to seeing them in "perfect silence"
- Application to classical education: the balance between analytical learning and contemplative wonder