

# JESSICA DIAMOND: WHEEL OF LIFE

## TEACHER GUIDE



The Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is delighted to present [\*Jessica Diamond: Wheel Of Life\*](#). The monumental text-and-image-based artwork is the largest museum installation to date by American conceptual artist Jessica Diamond (b. New York City, 1957). *Wheel Of Life* fills the Hirshhorn's second-floor inner circle galleries with 15 text-and-image based artworks that contain numerous allusions to American literature and twentieth-century popular culture, which highlight the imaginative nature of the artist's practice.

This guide consists of five arts-integrated lessons for students in grades 6–12 that serve as a learning framework for teaching autobiography and literary devices. Each standards-aligned lesson highlights a work in *Wheel Of Life* and includes ready-to-implement classroom discussion prompts, background on each artwork, and a printable student activity page. In addition to the lessons in this teacher guide, you'll find links to digital content on the Smithsonian Learning Lab, a link to Hirshhorn Eye video for the exhibition, additional information on Jessica Diamond, and tips for extended artmaking. We hope you and your students enjoy making connections between text and image in *Jessica Diamond: Wheel Of Life*.

Image: Installation view of *Jessica Diamond: Wheel Of Life* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2023. Acrylic and latex paint on wall. Photo: Rick Coulby. Courtesy of Jessica Diamond.

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## Lesson 1 Think Like a Conceptual Artist

In this lesson, students will be introduced to conceptual art and will practice thinking critically like a conceptual artist by brainstorming words and symbols that remind them of circles.

Standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.6-8.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.9-10.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.11-12.4

## Lesson 2 Introduce Yourself

In this lesson, students will identify metaphors in literary texts by Jessica Diamond and Henry David Thoreau. Students will then create their own autobiographical visual poem.

Standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2d

## Lesson 3 Speak Now

In this lesson, students will learn about imagery and use narrative techniques, including dialogue and pacing, to describe the event of their first word or the first word of someone they love.

Standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3

## Lesson 4 Jump Inside

In this lesson, students will step inside an animal's perspective and write a free-verse poem from their point of view. *This lesson uses the Harvard Project Zero thinking routine, [Step Inside](#).*

Standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3a, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3

## Lesson 5 Research Circle

In this lesson, students will identify metaphors and allusions by comparing primary sources to the poetical text of artist Jessica Diamond. Teachers, for the student activity, please have students use this [Learning Lab Collection](#) or print out the resources to use in the classroom.

Standards: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-8.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2

## Appendix About the Artist

### Ideas for Artmaking

### Larger font for poetical texts



## LESSON 1

# THINK LIKE A CONCEPTUAL ARTIST

## CLOSE LOOK



Installation view of *Jessica Diamond: Wheel Of Life* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2023. Acrylic and latex paint on wall. Photo: Rick Coulby. Courtesy of Jessica Diamond.

What do you notice about this artwork?

How do you think the artist created this?

What surprises you about this artwork?

What questions do you have about the artwork?

## ABOUT THE ART

*Wheel Of Life* is a monumental text-and-image-based **art installation** by American **conceptual** artist Jessica Diamond (b. New York City, 1957). Her installation fills the Hirshhorn's second-floor inner-circle galleries with 15 text-and-image based artworks that she calls "poetical texts." All the poetical texts come together to be a meditation on the circle and its meaning in our lives.

As an artist, Diamond draws and writes directly on walls. When she was asked to create an artwork for the [Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden](#), she wanted her art to respond to the circular elements of the museum's architecture. For Diamond, researching is part of her artistic process, so she started making her art by brainstorming things and ideas for circles.

An **art installation** is an artwork designed for a specific place or space.

**Conceptual art** is a kind of art where the idea behind the artwork is more important than the art object.



## ACTIVITY PAGE

# THINK LIKE A CONCEPTUAL ARTIST

For conceptual artists, the ideas that make up the art are most important. Use the space below to write or sketch as many ideas, words, and things as you can in 5 minutes that remind you of circles.

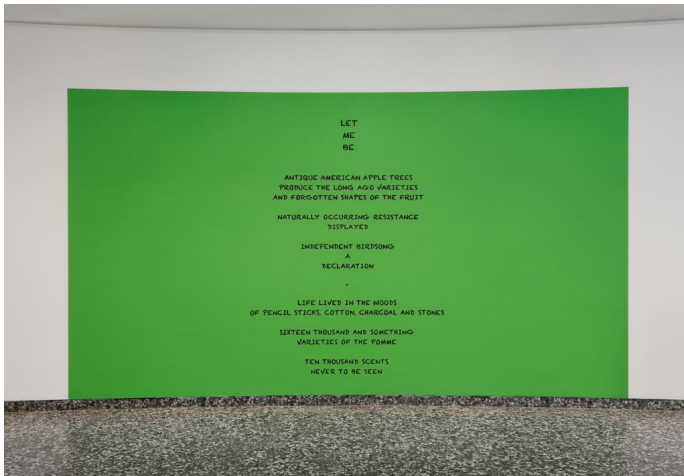


Not sure where to start? What do you see around you that is shaped like a circle? Have you ever eaten anything that was shaped like a circle? Where might you find circles in your everyday life?



## LESSON 2 INTRODUCE YOURSELF

### CLOSE LOOK



Jessica Diamond, *Apple Season (Artist's Life #2)*, 2017/2023, Acrylic and latex paint on wall, Dimensions variable upon installation, Photo: Rick Coulby. Courtesy of Jessica Diamond.

Before reading *Apple Season (Artist's Life #2)*, what do you notice about the shape of the poetical text? What does it remind you of?

Why do you think the artist shaped the poetical text like an apple and a flower pot?

This is an autobiographical text that introduces the artist, Jessica Diamond. What do you think she is telling us? What makes you say that?

### ABOUT THE ART

*Apple Season (Artist's Life #2)* is the first **poetical text** in *Wheel Of Life* and serves as an autobiographical prologue to the installation. It features matte black text shaped like an apple atop a flower pot on a background that is green to reference a green apple, along with green as a verdant color. Here, Diamond introduces herself and her current state of being by comparing her life as an aging artist to an excerpt of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). In *Wild Apples, The History of the Apple Tree* (1862) Thoreau writes about the apple tree and varieties of the fruit as a metaphor for the history of humankind, comparing himself to a wild apple. Both Diamond and Thoreau compare their life stories to the symbolism of the apple tree.

**Poetical text** is how Jessica Diamond refers to the writing in her artworks.



# ACTIVITY PAGE

## INTRODUCE YOURSELF

1. If you could choose an object to represent your life, what would you choose and why?
2. With a pencil, lightly sketch an outline of your chosen object in the space provided. Then fill the shape with a poem or words that tell the reader about you. When finished, carefully erase the outline.

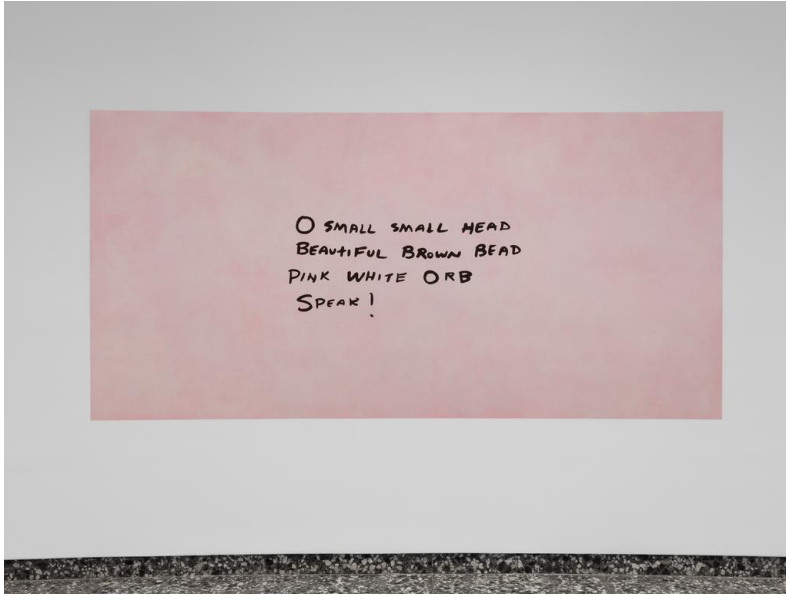




## LESSON 3

# SPEAK NOW

## CLOSE LOOK



Jessica Diamond, *Untitled (O Small Small Head)*, 1989/1991. Acrylic and latex paint on wall. Dimensions variable upon installation. Photo: Rick Coulby. Courtesy of Jessica Diamond.

As you carefully read *Untitled (O Small Small Head)*, imagine what the words are describing.

Sketch what you imagine the poetical text to be about. When done, share your sketch or idea with a partner.

What details did your sketches share? How were they different?

This work is about the anticipation of a child speaking their first word. What was the story of your first word or the first word of someone you love?

## ABOUT THE ART

*Untitled (O Small Small Head)* features matte black text centered on a gigantic pinkish-white shimmering rectangle. In this work, Diamond urges the reader to consider the beginning of an individual's use of language. The anticipation of a child's first word is a nearly universal human experience. The artist makes reference to the wheel of life with the letter O and repeated circular **imagery** of heads, beads, and orbs.

**Imagery** is language that writers use to create images in the mind of the reader.



# ACTIVITY PAGE 1

## SPEAK NOW

Do you know your first word? In this activity you will create a comic strip of the story of your first word or the first word of someone you love. Answer the questions below to spark ideas for your comic strip.

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1. Who was there?

These are the characters in your comic.

---

2. Where did it happen?

This is the background of your comic.

---

3. What was said?

This is the dialogue.

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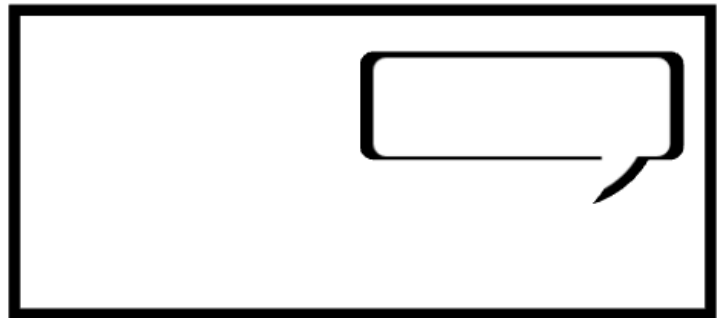
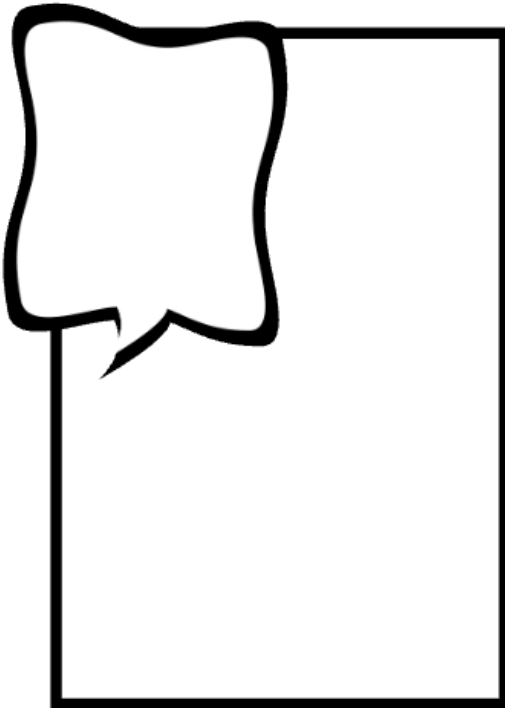
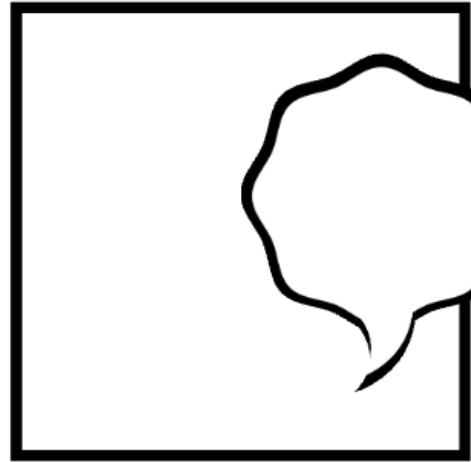
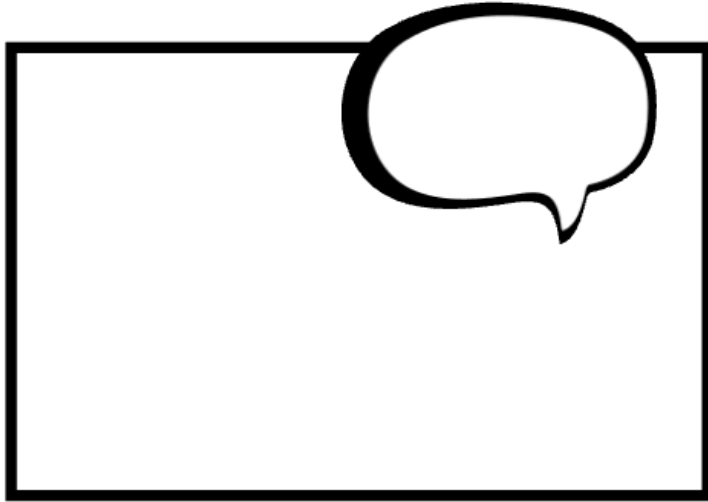




# ACTIVITY PAGE CONTINUED

## SPEAK NOW

Using the information from the front page, create your own comic using some or all of the boxes below!

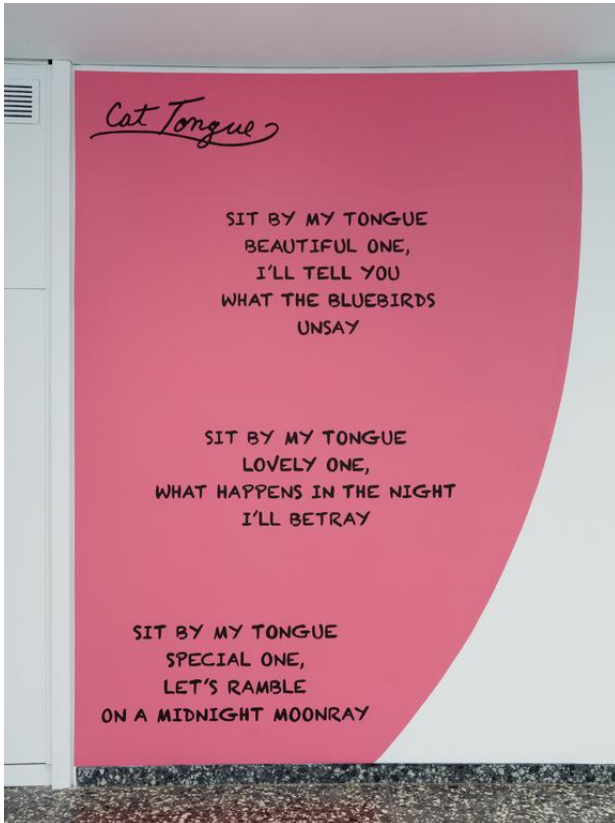




## LESSON 4

# JUMP INSIDE

## CLOSE LOOK



Jessica Diamond, *Words at Play: Cat Tongue*, 2020/2023. Acrylic and latex paint on wall. Dimensions variable upon installation. Photo: Rick Coulby. Courtesy of Jessica Diamond.

Carefully read *Words at Play: Cat Tongue*.

What does the phrase “sit by my tongue” mean to you?

Imagine you are the cat from this poetical text. What do you think the cat understands?

What might the cat know about or believe?

What would the cat care about? What makes you say that?

Look again at the poetical text. Why do you think the artist placed the words on a pink background? Why title this work in cursive?

## ABOUT THE ART

*Words at Play: Cat Tongue* consists of matte black text organized into a cursive title, “Cat Tongue,” followed by three stanzas of block letters enclosed within a curved pink shape referencing a section of a cat’s tongue. According to the artist, the cursive title is symbolic of playfulness as it is a writing style she associates with her childhood. The poetical text addresses the subject matter of imaginary animal language. It contains a linguistic twist on the communications between animals and people, as referenced in the stories of *Dr. Doolittle* (1920).



# ACTIVITY PAGE

## JUMP INSIDE

Jump inside the mind of an animal and write a free verse poem from their perspective. To guide your thoughts, answer the prompts below.

1. Choose an important animal in your life and write it below. It could be a pet or an animal from your favorite movie or book.

2. Use the graphic organizer below to step inside the perspective of your animal.

Question	Answer
What does your animal understand?	
What might your animal know about or believe?	
What might your animal care about?	

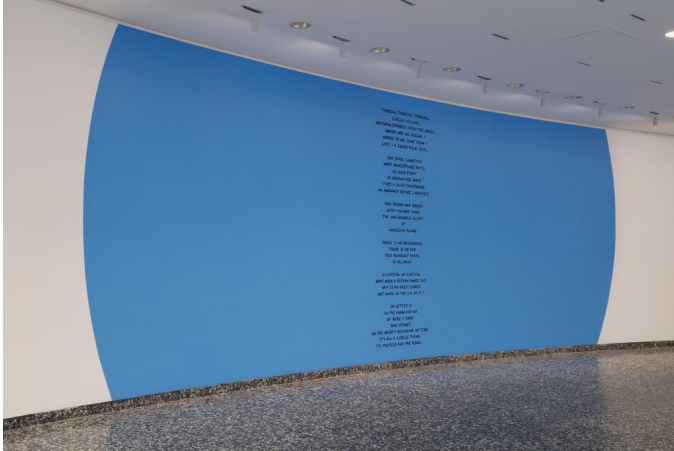
3. Now, write a free verse poem inspired from the perspective of your chosen animal in the space provided. Use the information you wrote in the graphic organizer above to step inside their mind.





## LESSON 5 RESEARCH CIRCLE

### CLOSE LOOK



Jessica Diamond, *Words at Play: A Circle Thing (Thoreau, Thoreau, Thoreau) #2*, 2018/2023. Acrylic and latex paint on wall. Dimensions variable upon installation. Courtesy of Jessica Diamond.

Using the activity page, read the poetical text *Words at Play: A Circle Thing (Thoreau, Thoreau, Thoreau) #2* and circle the references to circles you find.

Did anything surprise you?

Compare your words about circles from **Lesson 1: Think Like a Conceptual Artist** to what you circled in the poetical text above. Did you have any similar words or ideas?

### ABOUT THE ART

*Words at Play: A Circle Thing (Thoreau, Thoreau, Thoreau) #2* is inspired by the circular shape of the Hirshhorn Museum. The poetical text includes matte black text organized into six stanzas at the center of a giant blue sphere cut off where it meets floor and ceiling. To some it appears as the iris and pupil of an eye. This poetical text is delivered to the viewer via **wordplay**, combining the symbolism of the circle with the artist's view of the American cultural experience. Utilizing rhymes, puns, and **allusions**, Jessica Diamond draws references from the work of American transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman in addition to Shakespeare's plays, classic songs from the 1960s, and icons of twentieth-century American pop culture.

Another word for pun is **wordplay**.

An **allusion** is a literary device that is used to remind readers of another text.



# ACTIVITY PAGE

## RESEARCH LIKE AN ARTIST

Each stanza in *Words at Play: A Circle Thing (Thoreau, Thoreau, Thoreau) #2* contains at least one allusion. Research Jessica Diamond's source materials for her poetical text and match primary documents for each allusion with the correct stanza using the materials provided by your teacher.

**Stanza 1**

*Thoreau, Thoreau, Thoreau...  
Circles Sailing.  
Whitman Sparkles From the Wheel  
Where Are We Going?  
Where Do We Come From?  
Life - A Color Film, Real.*

**Stanza 2**

*Sam Spade Conveyed  
What Shakespeare Say'd:  
US, Such Stuff  
As Dreams Are Made  
(This A So-So Paraphrase  
An Awkward Rhyme I Assayed)*

**Stanza 3**

*Now 'Round and 'Round  
With Yin And Yang  
The Inalienable Glory  
Of  
American Slang*

**Stanza 4**

*There Is No Beginning  
There Is No End  
This Heavenly Shape  
Is All Bend*

**Stanza 5**

*O Capital Of Capital  
What Would Orphan Annie Say:  
Why Is An Oreo Cookie  
Not Made In The U.S. Of A.?*

**Stanza 6**

*O Letter O  
in The Know and No  
Of Zero I Sing!  
Joni Opined  
On The Merry-Go-Round Of Time  
It's All A Circle Thing.  
P.S. Proteus And The Ring...*

# ABOUT THE ARTIST



Jessica Diamond installing *Wheel Of Life*. Courtesy of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

Jessica Diamond (b. Bronx, New York, 1957) is an American conceptual artist who writes and draws on walls. She emerged as an artist in downtown New York in the 1980s and created work about American life. She has written on walls in galleries and public spaces around the globe and her work is held in numerous collections, including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

# IDEAS FOR ARTMAKING

Continue the conversations from each lesson through visual and performing arts! See the ideas below for continued art-making in and out of your classroom.

## **Lesson 1: Think Like a Conceptual Artist**

Using their words and sketches from the activity page, have students create an artwork from a material(s) of their choice based on what circles mean to them.

*Materials: Anything you have.*

## **Lesson 2: Introduce Yourself**

After students have drafted their own concrete poem with the activity page, have students create a final version using permanent marker on tinfoil, metallic, or mirrored paper.

*Materials: Tinfoil, metallic, or mirrored paper and permanent markers.*

## **Lesson 3: Speak Now**

In small groups, students perform one of the comic strips from the activity page. Ask them to carefully consider the poses and expressions of the actors and how the dialogue is spoken.

*No materials needed.*

## **Lesson 4: Jump Inside**

Once students have completed the activity page, ask them to consider a feature of their chosen animal such as a tail, nose, or something else. Ask students to zoom in and reduce the feature to a simple shape and color. Have students cut the shape out of construction paper or colored cardstock and write their poetical text on top with markers.

*Materials: colored paper, scissors, pencil, markers.*

## **Lesson 5: Research Circle**

Ask students to consider and list the books, songs, movies, artworks, symbols, and historical moments that are important in their personal lives. Have students create a digital collage of the things that describe them. Print out the paper and have students write their own free verse poem about themselves to display side by side.

*Materials: computer, printer, paper, writing supplies.*

# APPLE SEASON (THE ARTIST'S LIFE #2)

Let  
Me  
Be

Antique American Apple Trees  
Produce The Long Ago Varieties  
And Forgotten Shapes Of The Fruit

Naturally Occurring Resistance  
Displayed

Independent Birdsong  
A  
Declaration

\*

Life Lived In The Woods  
Of Pencil Sticks, Cotton, Charcoal And Stones

Sixteen Thousand And Something  
Varieties Of The Pomme

Ten Thousand Scents  
Never To Be Seen



# UNTITLED (O SMALL SMALL HEAD)

O Small Small Head  
Beautiful Brown Bead  
Pink White Orb  
Speak!

# WORDS AT PLAY: CAT TONGUE

Cat Tongue

Sit By My Tongue  
Beautiful One,  
I'll Tell You  
What The Bluebirds  
Unsay

Sit By My Tongue  
Lovely One,  
What Happens In The Night  
I'll Betray

Sit By My Tongue  
Special One,  
Let's Ramble  
On a Midnight Moonray

# WORDS AT PLAY: A CIRCLE THING (THOREAU, THOREAU, THOREAU) #2

*Thoreau, Thoreau, Thoreau...*

*Circles Sailing.*

*Whitman Sparkles From the Wheel*

*Where Are We Going?*

*Where Do We Come From?*

*Life - A Color Film, Real.*

*Sam Spade Conveyed*

*What Shakespeare Say'd:*

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*American Slang*

*There Is No Beginning*

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*This Heavenly Shape*

*Is All Bend*

*O Capital Of Capital*

*What Would Orphan Annie Say:*

*Why Is An Oreo Cookie*

*Not Made In The U.S. Of A.?*

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