

Walt Whitman and The Civil War



Lesson Plans for Grades 7-9
Walt Whitman House, NJ State Historic Site
Camden, NJ

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PREFACE

These lesson plans were developed for teachers to use in conjunction with a class visit to the Walt Whitman House in Camden, New Jersey, the poet's home in the last years of his life. He came to Camden in 1873 where he lived with his brother George. By this time in his career, Whitman had an international reputation and attracted the attention of the day's most prominent literary figures. Among them, Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde came to Camden to visit Walt Whitman. In 1884 he purchased his own home, the only house he ever owned, at 328 Mickle Street. He lived there until his death in 1892.

During his years in Camden, Whitman was well-known for a series of lectures he delivered on the death of Abraham Lincoln. An expression of his great admiration for the fallen leader, these dramatic presentations concluded with a recitation of Whitman's popular poem "Oh Captain! My Captain!." On April 14, 1887, Whitman delivered his lecture in New York City at Madison Square Theater. Among the attendees were many of the prominent people of the day including Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie, William Dean Howells, and Mary Mapes Dodge.

Whitman is considered one of this country's greatest poets. Invigorating poetry with a fresh, original voice, Whitman amazed his contemporaries. Among them, Ralph Waldo Emerson described Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."

We hope this handbook will make Whitman's work more accessible to younger students and enrich the study of American history through an appreciation of Whitman's experience of the Civil War. If you have suggestions or comments for future editions of teachers' handbooks, please contact the Walt Whitman House.

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Walt Whitman and the Civil War

Unit Objectives

The purpose of this unit is to explore the connections between the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, and the poetry of Walt Whitman through classroom activities and an up close look at Whitman's surroundings and personal belongings at his home in Camden.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- To understand the impact of the Civil War on Whitman's life and work
- To understand and appreciate selected Whitman poems on the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln
- To understand Whitman's literary style
- To understand the elements of poetry, including metaphor, mood, symbol and free verse
- To understand and appreciate the elegy

Pre-Visit Course of Study

In order to give students a foundation for understanding Walt Whitman and his connection to President Abraham Lincoln and to the Civil War, it is recommended that the following resource pages, which include historical information and poems for discussion, be studied before visiting the Whitman House. Lessons developed around these resources will give students a general background to Whitman's life and times, and introduce them to his poetic style. Specifically, the lessons will help students understand how the Civil War influenced Whitman and how he responded to that monumental event in American history. In addition, students will come to some insights into the person of Abraham Lincoln through the perception of Whitman the poet.

Resource #1

Walt Whitman: A Biographical Sketch

When people in the Delaware Valley hear the name of Walt Whitman, most of them think of the bridge that crosses the Delaware River between Gloucester City, just south of Camden, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is known as a bridge that takes drivers to Veteran's Stadium, the Philadelphia Airport, or South Street. The bridge's name is heard in traffic reports, but rarely is it questioned how the bridge got its name. The bridge is named after a famous American writer who lived in the nineteenth century. Walt Whitman is primarily known for his poetry, and the bridge is the only one in the United States named after a poet.

Why is a bridge in South Jersey named for a great poet? The answer is because Walt Whitman lived in the area for the last 19 years of his life. From 1873 to 1892, Walt Whitman lived in the city of Camden. Living first with his brother George on Stevens Street, he bought a house on Mickle Street in 1884. This house still stands and has recently been restored.

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in Long Island, New York. At age four, he moved with his parents to Brooklyn, New York. He attended public school there for about six years but dropped out at age 11. In 1836 Whitman returned to Long Island where he was hired as a school teacher. From there, his career took him to New York City, where he wrote and edited several newspapers, including the *Star* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. He continued in newspaper work in New York until interests led him to New Orleans in 1846. His stay in New Orleans was brief. After only several months of employment at a newspaper, the *Daily Crescent*, Whitman returned to Brooklyn.

Whitman is best known for his masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*. First published in 1855 as a collection of 12 poems, the book was immediately praised by the prominent American literary figure Ralph Waldo Emerson with the words, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Many other critics, however, did not like the work because of its unusual poetic style. Whitman did not write in the traditional poetic forms of the day, but in free verse, a form of poetry having no end rhyme or regular meter. In addition to being unique in style, Whitman's poetry was different from that of his peers in subject matter. He wrote about common people, such as mechanics, shoemakers, boatmen, and carpenters. Some critics felt that such ordinary subjects were not suitable for poetry. However, it is precisely because of his commonplace subjects and his poetic style that he is still popular today. This championing of the common people led many to call Whitman the "poet of democracy."

From his first publication in 1855, Whitman worked on *Leaves of Grass* for his entire life. Over the years, he added poems to the text, revised existing poems, and published several new editions of the book. The most complete edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1892, the year of Whitman's death, and is known as the "deathbed" edition.

This unit focuses on two sections of *Leaves of Grass*. The first, "Drum Taps," is a series of poems about the Civil War. The second, "Memories of President Lincoln," is a group of poems that deals with the assassination of Lincoln.

In 1862 Whitman traveled to the war front in Virginia, where his brother George had been wounded. From there, Whitman settled in Washington D.C., serving as a volunteer nurse in army hospitals. The great impact that the war had on Whitman's life is reflected in his poems, many written from first-hand experience, some written in quiet reflection in the subsequent years in New Jersey. He remained in Washington for ten years, earning his living as a government clerk. In January, 1873, Whitman suffered a stroke and was unable to work. By the middle of 1873, Walt realized that he would not be able to resume his employment in Washington and moved to Camden to live with his brother George and his family.

It was during the years Whitman spent in Camden that he realized his greatest popularity. Whitman had a following that grew steadily and included many prominent citizens. Among the notables who visited Whitman in Camden was Oscar Wilde, the renowned Irish writer. He paid the "Good Grey Poet" two visits in 1882. Whitman's popularity continued to grow due to a series of lectures on the death of Abraham Lincoln, which he gave in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. It was through these dramatic presentations that some people, perhaps not as familiar with his poetry, came to know Whitman.

When his brother George moved to a farm in Bordentown, New Jersey, in 1884, Whitman bought his own house at 328 Mickle Street. Although George asked Walt to move in with him, Walt decided to stay in Camden because he liked the city. Camden, perhaps, reminded him of the Brooklyn of his youth, and he was pleased to be close to the ferry, which enabled him to visit Philadelphia often. In addition, Walt was close to the farm of friends, the Staffords, near Laurel Springs, New Jersey. For rest and relaxation, he frequented the farm and Timber Creek, which ran near the property.

When Walt Whitman lived in Camden, the city was a bustling industrial center of railroads, factories, and docks. Still, Camden was not viewed as an ideal place to live. Some of Whitman's friends encouraged him to leave the city, and even offered him a place to live. The poet, however, preferred to stay in Camden. The city gave him an

opportunity to live and work among the people he celebrated in his work.

Whitman's house on Mickle Street is a simple, wooden, row house that he called his "shanty." The two-story, brown house sits within a row of brick homes. Whitman's bedroom was on the second floor where, from his window, he liked to watch the activity of the street below and the waterfront beyond. He sometimes passed the time on the street with his dog, Watch, or went to the waterfront for a view of the setting sun.

Suffering a second stroke, the poet was in ill health in the last few years of his life. He died on March 26, 1892, and is buried in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden. Laid to rest with Walt in an impressive tomb of his own design are his parents and other family members.

Check Your Understanding

1. Why is Whitman often referred to as a "poet of democracy"?
2. Why did some literary critics dislike *Leaves of Grass*?
3. Why did Whitman remain in Camden?
4. How do you think Walt Whitman was able to become a great writer even though he had only six years of formal education?

Answer Key--Resource #1

1. In his poems, Whitman frequently championed the common people.
2. Whitman did not write in traditional forms and his frank treatment of certain subjects seemed in bad taste to many of his contemporaries.
3. He liked the city. It may have reminded him of Brooklyn and his youth.
4. Answers will vary. Students may note that his years as a teacher and journalist led to a life of continued learning and writing. Also, he persevered in spite of criticism and lack of financial success.

Resource #2

The Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, and Walt Whitman

The Civil War was the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil. The conflict was between southern states that seceded from the United States and formed their own country (electing Jefferson Davis as their president) and northern states that wanted to preserve the union of the United States. The army of the south was known as the Confederate Army (sometimes called the Gray), and the army of the north was known as the Union Army (sometimes called the Blue). The war lasted from 1861 to 1865 and resulted in more than 610,000 dead and 425,000 seriously wounded.

The causes of the war were many and complex. Put simply, the South fought for state's rights. They thought the central government of the United States exercised too much power, and they feared the government would create laws banning slavery in their individual states. The South saw the war as a war of independence. The North's major goal in the war was to keep the United States intact. The North eventually won the war, and the institution of slavery was abolished.

Walt Whitman became involved in the Civil War in 1862 when his brother George, a soldier for the Union army was wounded. Walt traveled to Fredericksburg, Virginia, to visit him. Here Whitman witnessed the horrors of the war. He stayed in camp for two weeks, and for the remainder of the war he volunteered in hospitals in the Washington, D.C. area. Whitman provided wounded soldiers, both Confederate and Union, with emotional support, comforting them and frequently writing letters for them. Many soldiers had fond memories of the gray bearded man who gave of himself so unselfishly.

The Civil War years were the most turbulent years in American history, as our very existence as a nation was in jeopardy. Were it not for the strong leadership of President Abraham Lincoln, determined to preserve the union, the United States might be two separate countries today. Whitman had a great admiration for Lincoln, which is evident in his poetry, prose, and in the lectures he delivered after Lincoln's assassination on April 14, 1865. Whitman was a strong believer in democracy, and he saw Lincoln as the leader who preserved democracy in the United States.

Beyond revering Lincoln for his political views, Whitman felt an affinity for the president because of his humble beginnings. His rise to power was not a result of having the advantages of the upper class, but rather a result of his intelligence, leadership qualities, and hard work. For Whitman, Lincoln was an example of how an ordinary person can achieve greatness in a democracy.

Check Your Understanding

1. Who fought each other in the Civil War?
2. Why did the South secede from the Union of the United States?
3. How did Whitman get involved in the war effort? What did he contribute to it?
4. Why did Whitman have such great admiration for Abraham Lincoln?

Answer Key--Resource #2

1. The Confederate Army (the South) fought the Union Army (the North).
2. The South feared the government of Abraham Lincoln would outlaw slavery.
3. Whitman became involved after his brother George was wounded. He provided emotional support to wounded soldiers and often wrote letters for them.
4. Whitman admired Lincoln's commitment to the preservation of the Union of the United States. He also admired the President as a man of common background who rose to power as a result of his strength of character and hard work.

Resource #3

Whitman Learns of the Outbreak of the Civil War

This excerpt from *Specimen Days* describes how Whitman learned of the start of the war and shows how people around him reacted to the news. *Specimen Days*, a work of prose written during Whitman's years in Camden, was first published in 1882 and includes Whitman's recollections and experiences during the war years.

Opening of the Secessionist War

News of the attack on fort Sumter and the flag at Charleston harbor, S.C., was receiv'd in New York city late at night (13th April, 1861,) and was immediately sent out in extras of the newspapers. I had been to the opera in Fourteen street that night, and after the performance was walking down Broadway toward twelve o'clock, on my way to Brooklyn, when I heard in the distance the loud cries of the newsboys, who came presently tearing and yelling up the street, rushing from side to side even more furiously than usual. I bought an extra and cross'd to the Metropolitan hotel (Niblo's) where the great lamps were still brightly blazing, and, with a crowd of others, who gather'd impromptu, read the news, which was evidently authentic. For the benefit of some who had no papers, one of us read the telegram aloud, while all listen'd silently and attentively. No remark was made by any of the crowd, which had increas'd to thirty or forty, but all stood a minute or two, I remember, before they dispers'd. I can almost see them now, under the lamps at midnight again.

Suggested uses of above excerpt:

- Compare and contrast prose and poetry.
- Discuss the way in which news was disseminated in the nineteenth century and compare it to the media today.
- Research the events of April 14, 1861 at Fort Sumter and write an article like the one Whitman might have read.

Resource #4

The Civil War: A Table of Important Facts

I. Confederate States (in order of secession)

South Carolina
Mississippi
Florida
Alabama
Georgia
Louisiana
Texas
Virginia
Arkansas
North Carolina
Tennessee

II. Union States

Maine
New Hampshire
Vermont
Massachusetts
Rhode Island
Connecticut
New York
New Jersey
Pennsylvania
Delaware*
Maryland*
Ohio
Missouri*
Kentucky*
Indiana
Illinois
Wisconsin
Minnesota
Iowa
Kansas
Oregon
California

*These “border” states continued to be slave states, although they remained part of the Union.

**West Virginia separated from Virginia in 1861; admitted to the Union in 1863

II. Distinguished Generals

Confederate Army

- Robert E. Lee (General in charge of all Confederate armies)
- Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson

Union Army

- Ulysses S. Grant (General in charge of U.S. Army)
- William T. Sherman

III. Principal Battles

- **Fort Sumter, South Carolina**
Secessionists opened fire on this fort on April 12, 1861
War began
- **First Battle of Bull Run, Virginia**
July 21, 1861
First major battle of the war and a Confederate victory
Dispelled hopes of a short war
- **Battle of Antietam, Maryland**
September 17, 1862
Bloodiest single day of the war
President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation five days later
- **Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee**
April 7, 1862
Important battle of the West
General Grant forced the Confederates to retreat
- **Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia****
December 13, 1862
Confederate victory
- **Battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia**
April 30 - May 2, 1863
Confederate victory; Greatly lowered Union morale
- **Battle of Vicksburg, Mississippi**
May 19 - July 4, 1863
Important Union victory
Opened up Mississippi River area to the Union
Split the Confederacy in half geographically
- **Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania**
July 1 - 3, 1863
Largest battle of the war
Union victory

Considered the turning point in the war

In November, President Lincoln delivered Gettysburg Address at the dedication of a cemetery for soldiers killed in this battle

- **Surrender at Appomattox, Virginia**

April 9, 1865

Northern troops captured Richmond and cornered General Lee at Appomattox Court House in Virginia

General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant

Six weeks after the surrender, the last of the fighting ceased

**the battle in which George Whitman was wounded

Resource #5

Four Poems for Discussion

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Beat! Beat! Drums!

This poem was written shortly after the beginning of the war. Whitman was still living in Brooklyn, New York, and had not yet had any personal involvement in the conflict. Whitman's purpose in this poem was to rally people behind the Union cause. Above all else, Whitman wanted the union of the United States preserved.

Beat! Beat! Drums!

BEAT! beat! drums!-- blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows--through doors--burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet--no happiness must he have now with his bride, 5
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums--so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!--blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities--over the rumble of wheels in the streets;
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep in
those beds, 10
No bargainers' bargains by day--no brokers or speculators--would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?
Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums--you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums!--blow! bugles! blow! 15
Make no parley--stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid--mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses, 20
So strong you thump O terrible drums--so loud you bugles blow.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

“Beat!Beat!Drums!”

1. Poetry is meant to be read aloud. When you read the first line of each stanza, what sounds or rhythms do you hear? **(The rhythm suggests soldiers marching to the beat of drums)**
2. This poem, often interpreted as a call to arms, reflects the fervor for the cause that Whitman shared with the North. The speaker of the poem attempts to get people to rally around the Union cause. What is the mood of the poem? **(The mood is one of alarm or urgency.)**
3. What effect is created by the repetition of the “b” sound in the first line of each stanza? **(The repetition of the “b” sound gives the poem a sense of driving force and purpose.)**
4. What purpose do the sounds of drums and bugles serve in the poem? **(The sounds of drums and bugles rally the people to the cause of preserving the union. The poem suggests that everyone will be affected. Some examples are the bridegroom with his bride (ll. 4-5), the farmer plowing his field (l. 6), people asleep in their beds (ll. 9-10), the old man, the child, the mother (ll. 17-18), even the dead (l. 19) will be shaken.)**
5. “Beat!Beat!Drums!” does not have a regular meter, nor does it rhyme, yet it has unity. How does Whitman create unity in the poem? **(Each stanza begins and ends with parallel words and phrases. Repetition of various words throughout also serve to unify the poem.)**
6. Why does Whitman, in the last line, call the drums “terrible”? **(He calls them terrible because a call to arms can be deadly.)**

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

“Come Up From the Fields Father”

By the time this poem was written, Whitman was involved in the war effort. Whitman, after visiting his brother George who was wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg, served as a volunteer army nurse. He comforted soldiers in the hospitals by talking with them, writing letters for them, and nursing their wounds.

While the poem expresses the grief many families experienced during the war, Whitman’s specific inspiration was a young farmer from Delaware, Ohio, named Oscar Cunningham. Cunningham was wounded on May 3, 1863, in the Battle of Chancellorsville. Doctors amputated the young man’s leg on May 1, 1864. Whitman then wrote Oscar’s family with hopeful news of his recovery. However, a month later Whitman wrote to his own mother:

“I have just left Oscar Cunningham, the Ohio boy--he is in a dying condition--there is no hope for him--it would draw tears from the hardest heart to look at him--his is all wasted away to a skeleton, & looks like someone fifty years old...”

Oscar Cunningham died on June 4, 1864, and was one of the first soldiers to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Come Up from the Fields Father

COME up from the fields father, here’s a letter from our Pete,
And come to the front door mother, here’s a letter from thy dear son.

Lo, ‘tis autumn,
Lo, where the trees, deeper green, yellower and redder,
Cool and sweeten Ohio’s villages with leaves fluttering in the moderate wind, 5
Where apples ripe in the orchards hang and grapes on the trellis’d vines,
(Smell you the smell of the grapes on the vines?
Smell you the buckwheat where the bees were lately buzzing?)

Above all, lo, the sky so calm, so transparent after the rain,
 and with wondrous clouds,
Below too, all calm, all vital and beautiful, and the farm prospers well. 10

Down in the fields all prospers well,
But now from the fields come father, come at the daughter’s call,

And come to the entry mother, to the front door come right away.

Fast as she can she hurries, something ominous, her steps trembling,
She does not tarry to smooth her hair nor adjust her cap. 15

Open the envelop quickly,
O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd,
O a strange hand writes for our dear son, O stricken mother's soul!
All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the main words only,
Sentences broken, *gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry skirmish, taken to*
hospital, 20
At present low, but will soon be better.

Ah now the single figure to me,
Amid all teeming and wealthy Ohio with all its cities and farms,
Sickly white in the face and dull in the head, very faint,
By the jamb of a door leans. 25

Grieve not so, dear mother, (the just-grown daughter speaks through her sobs,
The little sisters huddle around speechless and dismay'd,)
See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better.

Alas poor boy, he will never be better, (nor may-be needs to be better, that brave
and simple soul,)
While they stand at home at the door he is dead already,
The only son is dead. 30

But the mother needs to be better,
She with thin form presently drest in black,
By day her meals untouch'd, then at night fitfully sleeping, often waking,
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing,
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw, 35
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

“Come Up From the Fields Father”

1. This poem tells a story. When and where does the ‘story’ take place? (The setting is autumn, an Ohio farm, the home of a Civil War soldier.)

2. Read the first two lines carefully. Who is the speaker of the poem? **(A family member who is addressing “father” and “mother,” and refers to “our Pete.” Eventually it is understood that the speaker is the soldier’s sister.)**
3. What news does the letter bring to the family? **(The son has been wounded.)**
4. What has happened to the young soldier by the time the family finishes reading the letter? **(He has died.)**
5. On whom does the attention focus after line 32? **(the mother)**
6. A feature of Whitman’s poetry is the use of sensory details. Give some examples of sense imagery. **(sight: black dress (l. 32), sickly white face of mother (l. 24), colors of leaves (ll. 4-5); smell: ripe apples and grapes (l. 6-7), buckwheat (l. 8); sound: leaves fluttering (l. 5), bees buzzing (l. 8), sobs of sister (l. 26).**
7. “Beat!Beat!Drums!” and “Come Up From the Fields Father” address war, but the themes are very different. Compare the themes of the two poems. **(Answers will vary. “Beat!Beat!...” has a patriotic message, almost a rallying cry for war, while “Come Up...” reveals the personal tragedy that war imposes on individuals.)**

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

“O Captain! My Captain!”

This is Whitman’s most famous poem. It is unique because, unlike most of Whitman’s other poetry, “O Captain! My Captain!” is written in a regular meter and rhyme scheme. Like “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” this poem is an elegy. An elegy is a poem that mourns the death of someone. In these two elegies, Whitman mourns the death of Abraham Lincoln.

O Captain! My Captain!

O CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
 But O heart! heart! heart! 5
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up--for you the flag is flung--for you the bugle trills, 10
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths--for you the shores’ a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
 Here Captain! dear father!
 This arm beneath your head!
 It is some dream that on the deck, 15
 You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won; 20

Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

“Oh Captain! My Captain!”

1. In the first stanza, the people are “exulting” because the United States is at peace. The Civil War is over. Why, then, does the speaker of the poem feel grief? **(Because the “captain,” --President Lincoln-- is dead)**
2. What does the speaker urge the captain to do in the second stanza? **(To rise up and join the celebration)**
3. What does the speaker realize about the captain in stanza three? **(That the captain is truly dead)**
4. On two occasions, Whitman addresses the captain by another name. What does he call him? **(Father)**
5. A metaphor is a comparison between two seemingly unlike objects or ideas. In this poem, Whitman compares President Lincoln to the captain of a ship. As the captain of a ship guides his vessel through turbulent waters, Lincoln commandeered the nation through the Civil War. If the captain is a metaphor for Lincoln, for what is the ship a metaphor? **(The United States)**

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

This is Whitman’s most critically acclaimed poem of the Civil War era. It is a long poem, and only the first six sections are presented here. Interested students may wish to read the poem in its entirety.

When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d

1

WHEN lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d,
And the great star early droop’d in the western sky in the night,
I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west, 5
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night--O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear’d--O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless--O helpless soul of me! 10
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

3

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash’d palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle--and from this bush in the dooryard, 15
With delicate-color’d blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

4

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush, 20
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.) 25

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground,
spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown
fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards, 30
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black, 35
With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,
With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn, 40
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs--where amid these you journey,
With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,
Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac. 45

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

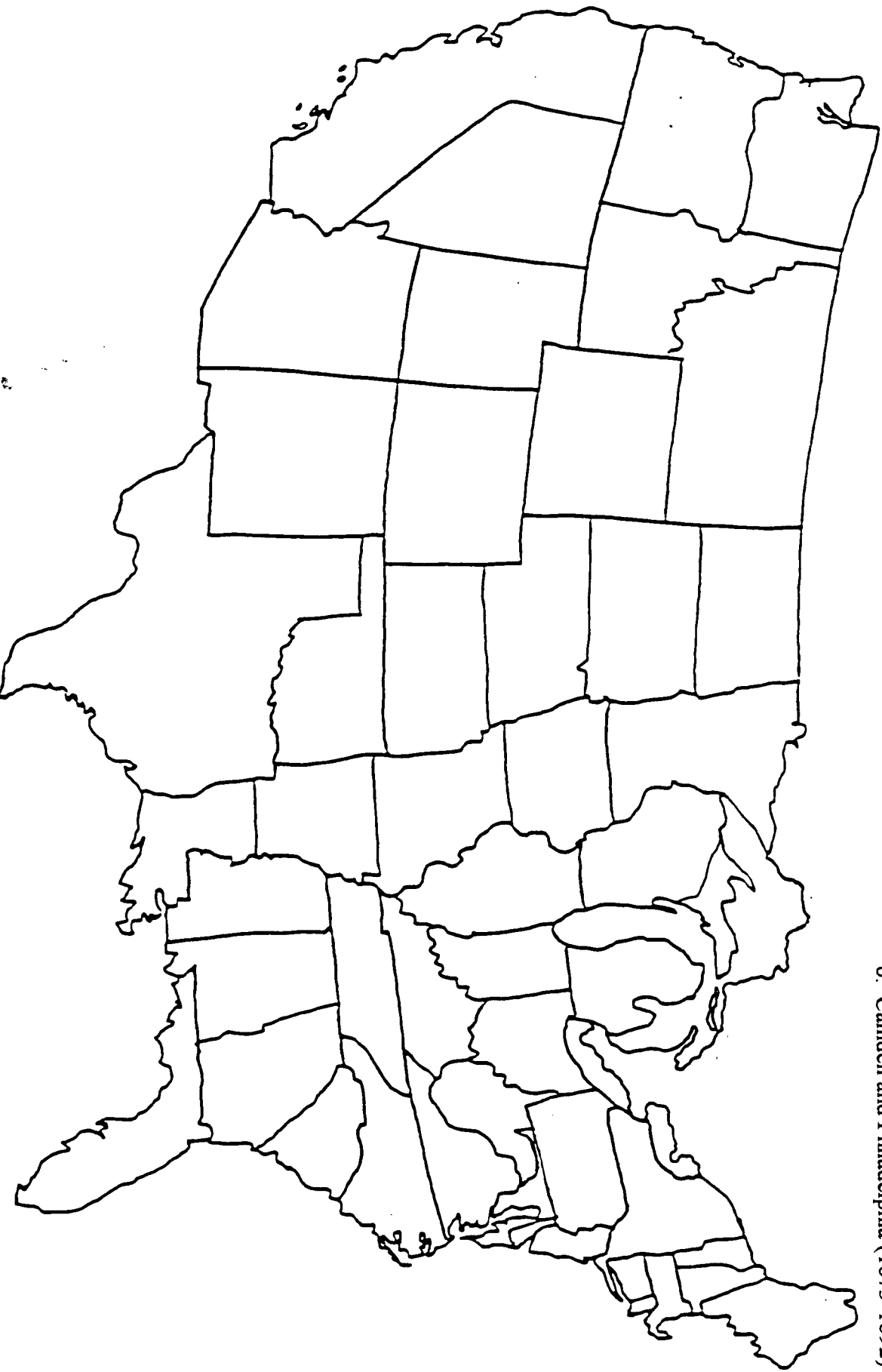
“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

1. In section 2, the “great star” disappears. If the star represents Lincoln, to what event in Lincoln’s life does third line refer? **(His assassination)**
2. In section 3, Whitman describes the leaves of lilacs as “heart-shaped.” What is the significance of this description? **(Since the heart is commonly understood as a symbol for love, the description signifies Whitman’s love for Lincoln.)**
3. In section 4, how does Whitman describe the thrush’s song? **(“Song of the bleeding throat,/Death’s outlet song of life.” (ll. 4-5;sect.4) The song is painful but necessary.)**
4. What is passing through the cities, woods, and orchards in section 5? **(a coffin)**
5. What is the “great cloud darkening the land” in section 6? **(Lincoln’s assassination and its aftermath)**
6. What is the mood of the American people in section 6? **(somber, sad, grief-stricken)**
7. A symbol is something concrete that stands for or represents an abstract idea. There are three key symbols at work throughout this poem, and all have been introduced in these first six sections. The bird and the star are two of the symbols. What is the third and what do you think it represents? **(Lilacs- Student interpretations may vary. Lilacs were recognized in the nineteenth century as a symbol of rebirth, probably because they are perennials that bloom in spring. They were also, however, the flower most commonly associated with funerals. Whitman could be using them to sum up feelings of loss at the death of Lincoln but also of renewed hope that is captured in memory.)**

Resource #6

On the map below, trace Walt Whitman's travels:

1. His birthplace, childhood, young adulthood in New York (1819-1848)
2. His stint in New Orleans (1848)
3. Trip to Boston (1860)
4. Visit to Civil War battlefield in Fredericksburg, VA (1862)
5. Washington, D.C. where Walt volunteered at army hospitals and worked as clerk in government office.
6. Camden and Philadelphia (1873-1892)



Resource #7

Visit to the Walt Whitman House

During a visit to Whitman's house in Camden, students can view artifacts that reveal the poet's admiration for Abraham Lincoln as well as photographs and original manuscripts that show how the Civil War was an inspiration for Whitman's war poetry. Certain objects will serve as visual and tangible cues, giving students an understanding of how the Civil War continued to have a wrenching significance for the nation at the end of the century.

The house itself, as an example of a typical middle class residence in nineteenth-century America, provides the opportunity to integrate learning about the historical period with study of selected literature of the time.

Begin your visit at the house by standing on the sidewalk outside. Give students a visual reference of the nineteenth century by pointing out the marble stepping stone in front of the house. It was placed there after Whitman received a gift of a horse and buggy from friends and admirers. Help students make a connection to the Civil War era by informing them that many Civil War soldiers could have left to fight for the cause and perhaps returned to a home much like this one. (The house was built in 1848.)

Inside the house a number of items provide the genesis for the discussion of topics which integrate Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and the Civil War.

Examine the **photograph of Walt's brother George in his Civil War uniform**. Reflect on what you have read about Walt's searching for his wounded brother and then extending his visit to care for other wounded soldiers. Consider that Walt later came to live with George in Camden, and that after Walt's death, George took over the care of Walt's house here on Mickle Street.

- What can you infer about the impact of the war on the poet?
- What can you conjecture about the relationship between the army nurse/poet and his soldier/businessman brother?

Examine several items that reflect Whitman's long-lasting attachment to the memory of Abraham Lincoln: **an admission ticket to Whitman's lectures on the death of Lincoln, a post card Walt had written to his brother Jeff about an upcoming lecture, and a portrait of the Lincoln family**. The poet held Abraham Lincoln in great esteem; consequently, he was deeply affected by the president's assassination. The aftermath of

grief inspired Whitman to write not only the great elegy of the Civil War period, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” but also a reminiscent lecture which he delivered numerous times in several large cities. In addition to the Lincoln memorabilia, consider this toast made by Whitman, recorded and published by Horace Traubel, a friend of Walt’s who, for four years, kept a daily account of the poet’s thoughts and deeds: **“Here’s to the blessed man above the mantel!”** (He was referring to Lincoln on the anniversary of the President’s assassination.) He went on to say, **“You know this is the day he died. After my dear, dear mother, I guess Lincoln gets almost nearer to me than anyone else.”** (Traubel 38)

- What do these words and artifacts tell you about Whitman, the man?
- Would you consider Whitman’s admiration of Lincoln hero worship? Are there similar relationships between writers and political leaders today?

Take a close look at a **photograph of Whitman taken by the Civil War photographer Matthew Brady.**

- Does the photo of Whitman reveal anything new about the poet?
- Can you recall seeing other Brady photographs of the Civil War era? How does this photograph compare?

Also, students should look at Walt Whitman’s **Stetson hat, his canvas backpack, and walking stick.** Although we are not certain of when Whitman acquired these things, it is not unlikely that he carried them as he trekked across fields and in and out of army hospitals tending to battle-scarred soldiers.

- What do these objects suggest to you about the social status of this poet?
- Is this image in keeping with the one you have of Walt Whitman as you came to know him through his poetry?

Post-Visit Activities

Time Line

Develop a time line using events from the lives of Whitman and Lincoln and events/battles of the Civil War. Use copies of period photographs to illustrate.

Poetry/Prose Writing

Use a provocative Civil War photograph as inspiration for a prose description or original poems about the event. Use sensory details and give character traits to bring the photograph to life.

Recall (brainstorm/review notes) the artifacts seen in the house. Using a Whitman poem as a model, write a “catalogue” poem based on the artifacts.

Web Site Exploration

Visit a web site to view a montage of photos of Whitman, who was one of the most frequently photographed people of his era. One resource for photographs is <http://jefferson.village.Virginia.edu/whitman/photos/>

Skit Production

Brainstorming in small groups/sharing notes taken during the house visit, write a skit about some aspect of Walt Whitman’s life and his relationship to Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War. Create props based on what was seen in the house and in photographs.

Research

Research and discuss the plight of African-Americans during the Civil War period. Study the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and the role of the Black regiments in the War. (The Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Colored Infantry is noteworthy.)

Supplementary Films

View the film *Glory* or excerpts from the film *Roots* and the Ken Burns’ documentary *The Civil War*.

Extended Discussion

Read and discuss Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*.

Poems for Further Study

Study other poems from *Drum Taps*. Have students choose a poem to read dramatically to the class.

More advanced students read and study all of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed.”

Guest Lecturer

Invite an historian to class as a guest lecturer or a debate moderator on Whitman, Lincoln, or the Civil War.

Walt Whitman Chronology

- 1819 Walter Whitman born (May 31) at West Hills, Huntington Township, New York. Walter was the second child of eight children born to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor, both descendants of early settlers on Long Island.
- 1823 Walter Whitman senior moves his family to Brooklyn where he works as a house builder.
- 1825 The Marquis de Lafayette visits Brooklyn. Walt Whitman recounts the memory of seeing and being embraced by Lafayette during a public gathering. Walt attends public school until about 1830.
- 1831-36 Works as office boy, printer's apprentice, then printer.
- 1836-38 Teaches at several schools on Long Island.
- 1838-39 Founds and publishes weekly newspaper, *Long Islander*, in Huntington, Long Island; writes for *Long Island Democrat*; writes poetry and literary prose.
- 1840-41 Campaigns for Martin Van Buren. Teaches school on Long Island again.
- 1841 Moves to New York City where he works in printing office of *New World*; writes for *Democratic Review*.
- 1842-45 Works for *Aurora*, *Evening Tattler*, and other papers in New York City. Publishes a "temperance novel," *Franklin Evans* (Nov. 1842).
- 1846-48 Becomes editor of *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*; February, 1848, goes to New Orleans to work on the *Crescent*; in May, returns to Brooklyn by way of the Mississippi, the Great Lakes, and the Hudson.
- 1848-49 Founds and edits the *Brooklyn Freeman*, a "Free-Soil" newspaper.
- 1849-54 Runs job-printing office, bookstore, and house building business. Works as

freelance journalist. Publishes several poems.

- 1855 Publishes first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (795 copies) first week of July. Father dies July 11. Ralph Waldo Emerson sends letter of praise (July 21) for *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1856 Publishes second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Book expanded from twelve poems to thirty-three poems. Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott visit him in Brooklyn. Writes "*The Eighteenth Presidency*."
- 1857-59 Writes for the *Brooklyn Times*.
- 1860 Goes to Boston to oversee publishing of third edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1861 Civil War breaks out; George Whitman enlists in Union Army.
- 1862 George is wounded at Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Walt goes to war front to find his brother.
- 1863-64 Settles in Washington, D.C., where he volunteers in the military hospitals and supports himself by part-time clerical work in the Army Paymaster's Office.
- 1865 Begins clerkship at Department of Interior; fired from clerkship by Secretary James Harlan, supposedly because of *Leaves of Grass*; transferred to clerkship in Attorney General's office. Writes "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (summer) in response to the assassination of Lincoln. Publishes *Drum-Taps and Sequel*.
- 1866 William Douglas O'Connor publishes *The Good Grey Poet*, defending Whitman.
- 1867 Publishes "Democracy" and the fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1868 William Michael Rossetti publishes *Poems of Walt Whitman* in London.
- 1870 Prints fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, *Democratic Vistas*, and *Passage to India*, all dated 1871.
- 1873 Suffers stroke and is partially paralyzed; mother dies; moves to Camden,

New Jersey, to live with George and Louisa Whitman.

- 1874 Leaves government clerkship. Publishes "Song of the Redwood Tree" and "Prayer of Columbus."
- 1876 Publishes "Centennial" edition of *Leaves of Grass* (a reprint of 1871 edition) and *Two Rivulets* to coincide with the nation's centennial.
- 1879 Gives first Lincoln lecture in New York (April); travels west (September) as far as Colorado.
- 1880 Travels in Canada.
- 1881 Oscar Wilde visits Whitman in Camden (January).
- 1884 Moves to 328 Mickle Street, Camden, (March) which he calls "a little old shanty of my own."
- 1885 Walt receives gift of horse and buggy from friends and supporters.
- 1886 Sits for portrait by Thomas Eakins.
- 1888 Suffers another paralytic stroke (June). Publishes *November Boughs* and *Complete Poems and Prose*.
- 1890 Delivers "Death of Abraham Lincoln" lecture for the last time (April) in Philadelphia. Begins planning construction of his tomb.
- 1891 Publishes *Good-Bye my Fancy* and "deathbed" edition of *Leaves of Grass* ("supercedes them all by far").
- 1892 Dies (March 26) at Mickle Street; buried (March 30) in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden, New Jersey.

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