

DISCOVER AMERICA

Teacher Guide



Whispers of Democracy: Immersing in Walt Whitman's Poetry

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Key Themes

- Hope and Resilience
- Leadership and Sacrifice
- Patriotism and National Identity

Core Values

- Community
- Faith
- Liberty
- Life

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to

- Identify Walt Whitman as the author of "O Captain! My Captain!" and explain the historical context in which it was written, particularly its connection to the American Civil War and President Abraham Lincoln.
- Analyze and interpret the symbolism of the ship and the captain in the poem, understanding how these symbols relate to the United States and Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War.
- Recognize and describe the structure of the poem, noting its stanzaic form and rhyme scheme, and discuss how these elements contribute to the overall impact of the poem.
- Explore the themes of leadership, loss, and mourning presented in the poem and discuss how these themes might relate to personal experiences or broader historical contexts.
- Engage in creating a visual representation of the poem, allowing them to express their understanding and personal reflections on the themes discussed.

Key Terms

- 0 1 **commemorate:** to honor the memory of.
- 0 2 **poetry:** a type of literature, or artistic writing, that attempts to stir a reader's imagination or emotions.
- 0 3 **mourn:** to feel or act very sad because of a death or great loss.
- 0 4 **stanza:** a section in a poem.
- 0 5 **symbolism:** when one object or thing stands in the place of something else, such as an idea, another object, a person, or a place.
- 0 6 **tragedy:** an event that causes sadness or disaster
- 0 7 **tyrannical:** imposing one's will on others by threat or force.

Introduction

TELL Students 📖

I am going to read something to you. Please listen carefully.

*In a quaint little town with streets paved in rhyme,
Lived a poet who traveled through space and through time.
With a notebook in hand and a pen full of dreams,
He painted with words and sewed seams with themes.*

*From mountains that whispered to rivers that sang,
His verses could dance, could clap, and could bang.
Each word was a world, a star in the sky,
Crafting galaxies vast from the lows and the high.*

*His mind was a meadow, lush, wide, and vast,
Where flowers of verses bloomed bright and fast.
In the quiet of twilight, under the moon's gentle gaze,
He'd write of the sun and its golden bright rays.*

*School children read of the worlds he would build,
Their hearts and their imaginations completely filled.
And though they might sit in a classroom quite plain,
Through his stanzas and similes, adventures they'd gain.*

*So here's to the poet, with his mighty fine quill,
Who with simple words, the world could thrill.
May his journey through verses never find an end,
For in each line and dot, a universe bends.*

ASK Students

What is this poem about?

TELL Students ✍️

That is right! This poem is about a poet! A poet is someone who writes poetry. **Poetry** is a type of literature, or artistic writing, that attempts to stir a reader's imagination or emotions.

Introduction

TELL Students (continued) 📷

Imagine that we're stepping into a time machine made of books. Today, we have a very special adventure planned with our friend Walt Whitman, a poet who loved to celebrate the beauty of America with his words. **[Reference Walt Whitman Image.]**

ASK Students

What is poetry? What do we call someone who writes poetry?

TELL Students ✍️

Poetry is like music made with words, painting pictures in your mind and stirring feelings in your heart. Today, I am going to play some beautiful music and read a poem. While you listen, you will close your eyes and think about how the music or poetry makes you feel. Does it make you feel happy, excited, or maybe even a little bit sad? Afterwards, you will draw pictures of the feelings that the music or poetry inspired in you. [Please give each student a clipboard and a piece of construction paper. Please choose one patriotic song and one patriotic poem to read to the class. As you read and play the music, encourage students to draw how they feel.]

ASK Students

How did you feel when you listened to the song and the poem? How does your drawing explain how you feel

TELL Students 📷 🗝️

Sometimes poetry and music can help unite, or bring, people together. Walt Whitman wrote one very important poem after a tragedy. A **tragedy** is an event that causes sadness or disaster. This tragedy was the death of President Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States.

[Reference President Lincoln Image.]

ASK Students

What do you remember about President Lincoln?

TELL Students

That is right! President Abraham Lincoln was a remarkable leader who guided the United States through one of its most challenging periods, the Civil War.

Introduction

TELL Students (continued)

During his presidency, he made a courageous decision to end slavery by signing the Emancipation Proclamation. This important document declared that all enslaved people in the Confederate states were to be set free, marking a significant step towards ending slavery in America. Lincoln's leadership during the Civil War was crucial. He worked hard to keep the country united and to ensure that freedom and equality would be rights for all citizens. His dedication to justice and his sense of right and wrong helped shape the nation during a time of deep division and conflict.

ASK Students

What did the Emancipation Proclamation declare? Who issued it?

TELL Students

That is right! President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of the Civil War. This groundbreaking proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." However, while this was a bold and important move, not everyone supported it. The Emancipation Proclamation was highly controversial at the time. Some critics in the North argued that Lincoln had overstepped his presidential powers, while others doubted it would have a practical impact since it applied only to areas controlled by the Confederacy, where the U.S. government had limited control at the time.

ASK Students

Did everyone support the decisions made by President Lincoln?

TELL Students

Despite the mixed reactions, the Emancipation Proclamation marked a critical turning point in the Civil War, reframing the conflict as a fight not just to preserve the Union but also to end slavery. Over time, more people began to support the Emancipation Proclamation, and it helped lead to the end of slavery across the United States with the passing of the 13th Amendment. President Lincoln knew it was important to do the right thing, even though it was very difficult and not everyone agreed with him at first.

Introduction

TELL Students (continued)

His brave decision also allowed African American soldiers to join the Union Army, which brought more soldiers to help in the war and gave a new, important reason to keep fighting. Lincoln showed strong leadership by standing up for what he believed was right for the country's future.

ASK Students

What made President Lincoln a great leader?

TELL Students

Being a leader often means having to make difficult choices that are good for everyone, even if not everyone likes those choices at first. Good leaders, like President Lincoln, always think about what is best for the whole country and not just a few people. For example, President Lincoln made the tough decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which helped end slavery. He knew it was the right thing to do to make the country better, even though some people didn't agree with him at the time. Let's watch another episode of Star Spangled Adventures to learn more. In this episode, we will explore a special poem written by Walt Whitman about President Lincoln. Whitman admired Lincoln because he was a brave leader who made hard decisions for the good of all people. The poem shows how much Whitman respected Lincoln for his courage and leadership. As we watch, think about what makes a good leader and how President Lincoln's decisions still affect us today.

WATCH

Star Spangled Adventures Cartoon: [Ep. 29: Walt Whitman](#)



Lesson

TELL Students

Walt Whitman, like Abraham Lincoln, started from humble beginnings. Born in 1819 on Long Island, New York, Whitman had to leave school at a young age to help support his family. He worked various jobs, including as an office boy, a printing apprentice at a local newspaper, and later as a teacher, printer, fiction writer, poet, editor, and journalist. In 1861, during the Civil War, Whitman's younger brother, George, joined the Union Army and was wounded the following year. Walt traveled to Virginia to take care of him. Although George recovered, this experience sparked a new passion in Whitman: he felt a deep call to aid and comfort wounded soldiers.

ASK Students

What experience sparked a new passion in Walt Whitman? Explain the new passion.

TELL Students

Please read the following passage to learn more. [Please print and disseminate fifth grade student text.]

Whitman then moved to Washington D.C., where he worked as a clerk. In his spare time, he visited military hospitals to care for wounded soldiers. Living in the capital during the war, Whitman became deeply interested in President Lincoln's leadership. He admired how Lincoln was managing the immense challenges of the war to preserve the Union. Whitman saw Lincoln several times around the city between 1863 and 1865, although the two never met officially. Whitman recognized the heavy responsibility Lincoln shouldered to keep the nation united. Just as Whitman responded to his calling to support wounded soldiers, Lincoln embraced his role to lead America through the difficult years of the Civil War.

ASK Students

How were Walt Whitman and President Lincoln similar?

TELL Students

On April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln attended a play called "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. Just five days earlier, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had surrendered, ending the Civil War. This brought hope for our nation's future, with former slaves gaining freedom and the Union staying together.

Lesson

TELL Students (continued)

However, that night brought tragedy once more with the death of President Lincoln.

ASK Students

What tragedy happened at Ford Theatre?

TELL Students 📷

Not everyone was pleased when the North won the Civil War. One unhappy person was John Wilkes Booth, an actor who supported the southern states, called the Confederacy. **[Reference John Wilkes Booth Image.]** Booth did not want the North to win, so he made a plan with some others to harm President Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, and Secretary of State William H. Seward. They first tried to kidnap President Lincoln but that plan didn't work.

ASK Students

Who was John Wilkes Booth?

TELL Students

On the night of April 14, 1865, President Lincoln was watching a play at Ford's Theatre, feeling happy and laughing with his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, and two friends, Henry Rathbone and Rathbone's fiancée, Clara Harris. They were all in a special seating area called a box. While the play was going on, Booth quietly went into Lincoln's box at 10:15 p.m. and used a small gun to shoot President Lincoln. Booth then jumped from the box to the stage and yelled out, "Sic semper tyrannis!" (The Virginia state motto translates to "Thus always to tyrants!")

ASK Students

What does the Virginia state motto mean?

TELL Students 🗣️

That is right! After John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln, he yelled out a motto that means tyrannical leaders will eventually be overthrown. **Tyrannical** refers to someone who uses threats or force to control others.

Lesson

Tell Students

Sadly, President Lincoln passed away the next morning at 7:22 a.m., surrounded by his wife and close friends. After the shooting, President Lincoln was quickly taken to a boarding house across the street. There, doctors, including the surgeon general, tried to help him, but soon realized his injuries were too severe.

ASK Students

How do you think people felt when they learned that President Lincoln had passed away?

TELL Students 📖🔑

Please read the following paragraph to learn more. [Please print and disseminate fourth grade student text.]

*Americans across the country mourned the death of a heroic leader who bravely guided the United States through the devastating Civil War. To **mourn** means to feel or act very sad because of a death or great loss. As the train carrying President Lincoln to his final resting place in Illinois made its nearly two-week journey north, tens of thousands of Americans stood beside the railroad tracks to pay their respects. This tragic event inspired the poet Walt Whitman to write numerous poems celebrating Lincoln's life, legacy, and impact on America.*

ASK Students

How did Walt Whitman feel about President Lincoln?

TELL Students 🔑

That is right! Walt Whitman respected President Lincoln. He recognized the burden that Lincoln carried to save the Union. He knew that President Lincoln answered his call to lead America through the grueling Civil War. After President Lincoln's death, Whitman felt a deep sense of loss and spent the summer writing various poems to **commemorate** the president's life. To commemorate means to honor the memory of.

ASK Students

What did Walt Whitman do to commemorate President Lincoln's life?

Lesson

TELL Students 🔑

One of these poems, "O Captain! My Captain!" became one of Whitman's most famous works. It was published in the Saturday Press on November 4, 1865. "O Captain! My Captain!" is broken into three stanzas. A **stanza** is a section in a poem. In this poem, Whitman decided to use rhyming, which was different from his usual style. For this special poem honoring Lincoln, he used a more traditional structure to convey his deep respect and sorrow.

ASK Students

How is "O Captain! My Captain!" different from Walt Whitman's other poems?

TELL Students 📖

Let's read the poem and dive into what it means:

"O Captain! my Captain!," by Walt Whitman

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!
 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
 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
 You've fallen cold and dead.

Lesson

TELL Students (continued) 📖

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

This poem is like a special story about a ship and its captain. The captain represents someone very important, Abraham Lincoln, who helped our country during a hard time called the Civil War. The ship is like our country, which went through a lot of tough times but finally won.

ASK Students

Who does the captain represent?

TELL Students

In the first part of the poem, we see the ship finally coming home after a long and tough journey filled with many challenges. Unfortunately, the captain, who led the ship through all these difficulties, did not survive. In the next part, the poem describes how everyone is gathered at the port, cheering and celebrating the ship's return and the captain's brave leadership. However, despite the joy and excitement, there is a deep sadness because the captain cannot hear the cheers—he is no longer there. It feels almost like a dream, where something very important is missing and everything feels strange and unreal. The speaker expresses a mix of happiness for the ship's safe return and deep sorrow over the loss of the captain, showing us how complex and confusing emotions can be.

ASK Students

What does the ship represent?

Lesson

TELL Students 🗝️

That is right! The ship symbolizes the United States. **Symbolism** is when one object or thing stands in the place of something else, such as an idea, another object, a person, or a place. In the last part of the stanza, the poem captures the speaker's sadness because even though the ship has returned home safely, the captain won't be coming back. This mix of feelings—relief that the journey was successful, but sorrow over the captain's absence—reflects a complex emotion.

ASK Students

Why is the speaker sad? What does sadness symbolize?

TELL Students

This scene in the poem is similar to a significant event in American history: the end of the Civil War. The country had overcome a long and difficult fight, and it was a time to heal and rebuild. However, President Abraham Lincoln, who had led the nation through this challenging period, passed away just as peace was beginning to settle. Like the captain in the poem, Lincoln did not get to see the peace he worked so hard for. This left the country with mixed emotions—glad that the conflict was over but heartbroken that their leader was gone.

ASK Students

In what way is the captain in the poem not seeing the ship come home safely like what happened to President Abraham Lincoln after the Civil War?

TELL Students

This poem, "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman, helps us understand the emotions people experienced when President Lincoln died and after the Civil War ended. It is like a window into history, helping us understand how joy and sadness can exist side by side, just like they do in our own lives.

ASK Students

Have you ever felt happy and sad at the same time?

Lesson

TELL Students

Think about a time when you accomplished something big, like winning a game or finishing a project. You might feel happy and proud, but maybe there is also sadness because someone you care about could not be there to celebrate with you. This is what happened in Whitman's poem. Even though the war was over and the Union had won, people were still sad because Lincoln, who was like a captain to them, had died. So, whenever you have mixed feelings about something, remember that it is okay to feel that way. Life is full of ups and downs, and it is natural to feel a range of emotions, just like the people in Whitman's poem did.

WATCH

Patriot of the Week: [Walt Whitman](#)





Modernizing "O Captain! My Captain!"

Objective:

Enable fifth graders to translate the themes and language of Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" into contemporary terms and present their interpretations creatively to the class.

Materials Needed:

- Copies of "O Captain! My Captain!" for each student
- Chart paper and markers
- Access to the internet and library resources for research (optional)
- Art supplies for creating visual aids (poster boards, colored pencils, markers, etc.)

Preparation:

- Print out copies of the poem for each student or group.
- Set up a station with art supplies and chart paper.

Introduction:

- Review the poem "O Captain! My Captain!" and discuss its historical context, focusing on its connection to Abraham Lincoln and the end of the Civil War.
- Explain the goals of the activity: to reinterpret the poem in a way that relates to today's world.

Group Formation and Discussion:

- Divide the class into small groups of 3-4 students.
- Each group reads through the poem together and discusses the main themes and emotions conveyed by Whitman.

Research and Brainstorming:

- Allow groups time to research modern-day leaders who might parallel the leadership qualities of Abraham Lincoln or other themes relevant to the poem.
- Groups brainstorm how these modern contexts can correlate with the poem's message. For example, they might choose a modern leader who showed courage and leadership during a crisis



Modernizing "O Captain! My Captain!"

Re-writing the Poem:

- Each group rewrites "O Captain! My Captain!" to reflect the modern context they have chosen, using today's language and imagery.
- Encourage creativity in how they present the poem—this could be through traditional writing, a rap, a song, or even a short skit.

Creation of Visual Aids:

- Groups create visual aids to help present their modernized version of the poem. These could include posters with key lines or images, or even digital presentations if resources allow.

Presentations:

- Each group presents their modern version of "O Captain! My Captain!" to the class, explaining their choice of modern context and how it relates to the original themes of the poem.
- After each presentation, allow time for a brief Q&A where students can discuss and critique the modern interpretations.

Reflection:

- Conclude the activity with a reflection session where students discuss what they learned about interpreting literature and relating historical poetry to contemporary issues.
- Discuss the importance of leadership qualities across different eras and how poetry can capture universal themes that are applicable across time.

This activity not only helps students understand Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" in a deeper way but also enhances their ability to analyze literature and relate it to the present day. It encourages teamwork, creativity, and critical thinking, as students explore the relevance of historical events and figures in today's world.

Comprehension Activity

NAME: _____ DATE _____

Objective: Assess fifth graders' understanding of Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and the connections between historical context and Whitman's poem "O Captain! My Captain!"

Instructions: Read each question carefully and write your answer in the space provided. Use complete sentences where possible.

Part 1: About Walt Whitman

1. Who was Walt Whitman? Describe Walt Whitman's profession and one interesting fact about his life.

2. What is Walt Whitman best known for in American literature? Mention one of his major works and describe its significance.

Comprehension Activity

NAME: _____ DATE _____

Part 2: About Abraham Lincoln

3. What role did Abraham Lincoln play during the American Civil War? Explain how he contributed to the war's outcome.

4. Why is Abraham Lincoln considered an important figure in American history? List two major achievements during his presidency.

Part 3: About "O Captain! My Captain!"

5. What is the main theme of "O Captain! My Captain!"? Explain what the poem is about and what it symbolizes.

Comprehension Activity

NAME: _____ DATE _____

6. Why did Walt Whitman write "O Captain! My Captain!"? Discuss the historical event that inspired this poem.

Part 4: Connecting History and Poetry

7. How does "O Captain! My Captain!" reflect Walt Whitman's feelings about Abraham Lincoln? Mention specific lines or phrases from the poem that show Whitman's emotions.

8. How might the poem have been received by people at the time it was written? Consider the historical context of the poem and how people felt about Abraham Lincoln after the Civil War.

Comprehension Activity

NAME: _____ DATE _____

Part 5: Personal Reflection

9. Do you think poetry is an effective way to express feelings about historical events? Why or why not? Provide examples from "O Captain! My Captain!" to support your answer.

10. If you were to write a poem about a current event, what would it be and why? Explain what event you would choose and what message you would want to convey in your poem.

Answer Key - Comprehension Activity

Part 1: About Walt Whitman

1. Who was Walt Whitman?

Walt Whitman was a poet, essayist, and journalist. He is often called the father of free verse. One interesting fact about his life is that he was deeply affected by the experiences of the Civil War, which influenced much of his writing.

2. What is Walt Whitman best known for in American literature?

Students will likely recognize Walt Whitman for his famous poem "O Captain! My Captain!," which was published in his well-known poetry collection "Leaves of Grass." First published in 1855 and revised throughout his life, "Leaves of Grass" broke traditional verse forms and is considered a cornerstone of American literature.

Part 2: About Abraham Lincoln

3. What role did Abraham Lincoln play during the American Civil War?

Abraham Lincoln was the President of the United States during the American Civil War. He played a crucial role in leading the nation and preserving the Union, and he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared the freedom of all enslaved people in Confederate-held territory.

4. Why is Abraham Lincoln considered an important figure in American history?

Lincoln is considered important for several reasons, notably for his leadership during the Civil War and for his role in abolishing slavery, which culminated in the passage of the 13th Amendment. He is also remembered for his commitment to the principles of national unity and equality.

Part 3: About "O Captain! My Captain!"

5. What is the main theme of "O Captain! My Captain!"?

The main theme of "O Captain! My Captain!" is the mourning and loss felt after the death of Abraham Lincoln. The poem uses the metaphor of a ship and its captain to symbolize the United States and Lincoln, respectively, emphasizing the sorrow and respect for the fallen leader.

6. Why did Walt Whitman write "O Captain! My Captain!"?

Whitman wrote "O Captain! My Captain!" as a response to the death of Abraham Lincoln in 1865. The poem expresses Whitman's deep personal grief and the nation's mourning over Lincoln's death.

Answer Key - Comprehension Activity

Part 4: Connecting History and Poetry

7. How does "O Captain! My Captain!" reflect Walt Whitman's feelings about Abraham Lincoln?

The poem reflects Whitman's deep admiration and respect for Lincoln, whom he viewed as a great leader. Phrases like "my Captain" and "fallen cold and dead" suggest a personal and national loss, showing Whitman's emotional connection to Lincoln's leadership and his tragic end.

8. How might the poem have been received by people at the time it was written?

The poem likely resonated deeply with people at the time, as many were grieving Lincoln's death at the end of the Civil War.

Part 5: Personal Reflection

9. Do you think poetry is an effective way to express feelings about historical events? Why or why not?

Yes, poetry can be an effective way to express feelings about historical events because it allows for personal and emotional responses to be conveyed in a nuanced and impactful manner. "O Captain! My Captain!" serves as a prime example, capturing the nation's grief and respect for Lincoln in a powerful and enduring way.

10. If you were to write a poem about a current event, what would it be and why?

Student's personal response expected here.

Student Text

Please read the following paragraph to learn more.

Whitman then moved to Washington D.C., where he worked as a clerk. In his spare time, he visited military hospitals to care for wounded soldiers. Living in the capital during the war, Whitman became deeply interested in President Lincoln's leadership. He admired how Lincoln was managing the immense challenges of the war to preserve the Union. Whitman saw Lincoln several times around the city between 1863 and 1865, although the two never met officially. Whitman recognized the heavy responsibility Lincoln shouldered to keep the nation united. Just as Whitman responded to his calling to support wounded soldiers, Lincoln embraced his role to lead America through the difficult years of the Civil War.



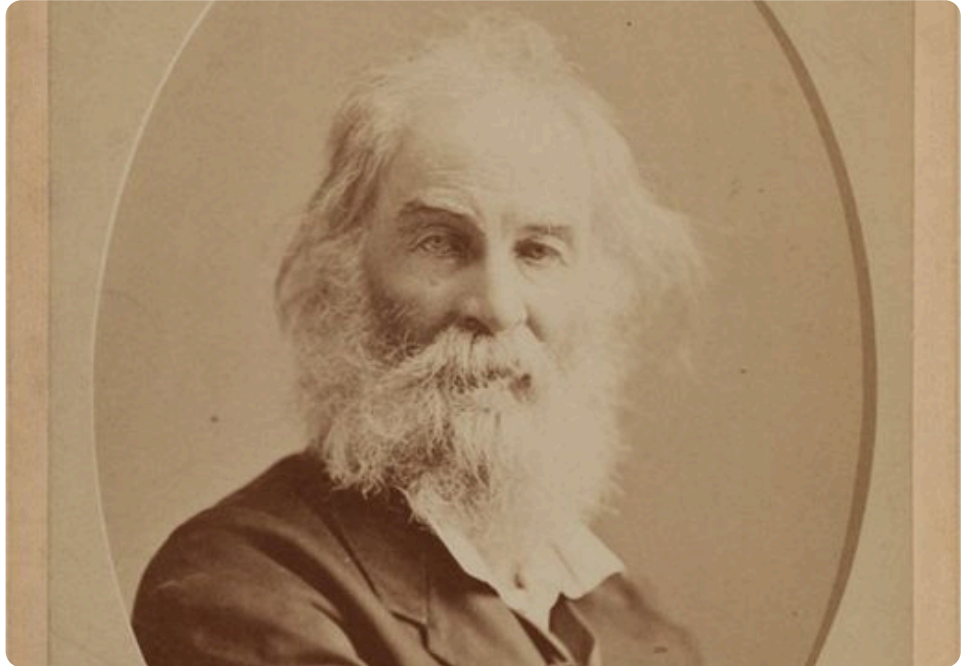
Americans across the country mourned the death of a heroic leader who bravely guided the United States through the devastating Civil War. To mourn means to feel or act very sad because of a death or great loss. As the train carrying President Lincoln to his final resting place in Illinois made its nearly two-week journey north, tens of thousands of Americans stood beside the railroad tracks to pay their respects. This tragic event inspired the poet Walt Whitman to write numerous poems celebrating Lincoln's life, legacy, and impact on America.

Resources

- <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/abraham-lincoln-assassination>
- <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/february-09/>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/whitmans-life/>
- <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman>
- <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/how-whitman-remembered-lincoln/>
- [https://pressbooks.pub/poetrypoetics/chapter/o-captain-my-captain/#:~:text=“O%27Captain!,Taps%20\(1865%2D1866\).](https://pressbooks.pub/poetrypoetics/chapter/o-captain-my-captain/#:~:text=“O%27Captain!,Taps%20(1865%2D1866).)

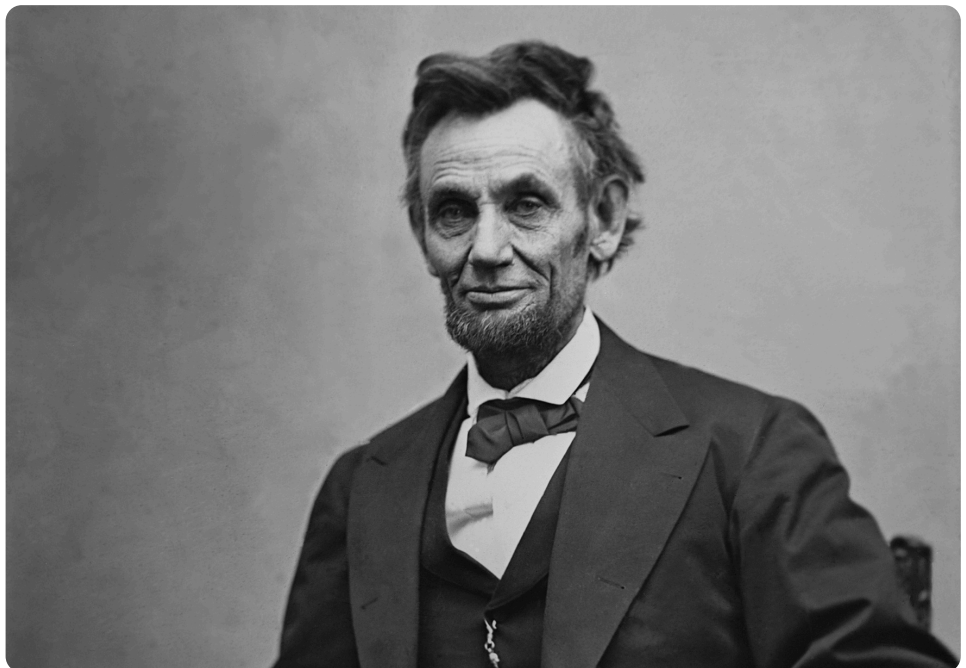
Images

Walt Whitman



Credit: Whitman Archive

Abraham Lincoln



Credit: Canva Pro.

Images

**John Wilkes
Booth**



Credit: Wikipedia

Notes



A series of 20 horizontal lines for writing notes, spaced evenly down the page.