

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

- Define stanza.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Key Terms

- 0 1 **commemorate:** to honor the memory of.
- 0 2 **poet:** someone who writes poetry.
- 0 3 **poetry:** a type of literature, or artistic writing, that attempts to stir a reader's imagination or emotions.
- 0 4 **mourn:** to feel or act very sad because of a death or great loss.
- 0 5 **stanza:** a section in a poem.
- 0 6 **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 7 **tragedy:** an event that causes sadness or disaster
- 0 8 **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.

Introduction

TELL Students (continued)

Poetry is a type of literature, or artistic writing, that attempts to stir a reader's imagination or emotions. Imagine that we are 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 use crayons to draw pictures of the feelings that the music or poetry inspired in you. You might draw pictures of smiling suns, twinkling stars, or even colorful rainbows bursting with happiness! And guess what? We will have a special sharing time where we'll all get to show our drawings to each other and talk about the magical journey our imaginations took us on. [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 illustrate 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 great 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?

Introduction

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. 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?

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 Abraham 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 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

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. 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?

Lesson

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. 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. Sadly, President Lincoln passed away the next morning at 7:22 a.m., surrounded by his wife and close friends.

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.

Lesson

ASK Students

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

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](#)





Feel the Beat of the Poem

Objective:

Help fourth graders explore how poetry, specifically Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!", can evoke different emotions and feelings through an engaging and interactive rhythm activity.

Materials Needed:

- Copies of "O Captain! My Captain!" split into stanzas
- A variety of musical instruments (e.g., drums, tambourines, shakers)
- Highlighters
- Audio recording of the poem (optional)
- Blank paper and art supplies for drawing

Preparation:

- Prepare enough copies of the poem for small groups.
- Set up a "music station" with various simple instruments.
- If available, prepare an audio recording of "O Captain! My Captain!" for students to listen to.

Introduction:

- Briefly review Walt Whitman and his poem "O Captain! My Captain!", emphasizing its historical background and connection to Abraham Lincoln.
- Explain that poetry can make us feel different emotions, just like music.

Listening and Reading:

- Play the audio recording of the poem or read it aloud to the class.
- Have students listen carefully and think about the emotions they feel as they hear each stanza.

Musical Exploration:

- Divide students into small groups and assign each group a stanza from the poem.
- Each group will choose instruments from the music station that they think match the mood of their stanza.
- Allow time for each group to practice how they might use their instruments to express the emotions of the stanza through rhythm and sound.



Feel the Beat of the Poem

Group Performances:

- Have each group perform their stanza with their chosen instruments, trying to express the poem's emotions through their music.
- After each performance, ask the audience (the rest of the class) to share what emotions they felt and how the music influenced their understanding of the stanza.

Artistic Reflection:

- Give each student a piece of paper and art supplies.
- Ask them to draw a scene or symbols from the poem that represent how it made them feel.
- Encourage creativity and expression of both the emotional and literal content of the poem.

Discussion and Wrap-up:

- Gather students and discuss what they learned about how poetry and music can evoke emotions.
- Talk about how their feelings changed or deepened by combining words with music and art.

This activity combines poetry, music, and art to deepen students' understanding of emotional expression in literature. By engaging with "O Captain! My Captain!" in a multi-sensory way, students can appreciate the powerful impact poetry can have on emotions and how it can be enhanced by other forms of art.

Fill in the Blank Activity

NAME: _____ DATE _____

Objective: Help fourth graders understand the key themes and language used in Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" through a fill-in-the-blank exercise.

Instructions: Use the word bank to complete each blank in the poem excerpts. Think about each word's meaning and how it fits into the context of the poem.

WORD BANK

ship voyage deck (2) cold bells (2) father fearful fallen won daring

1. "O Captain! my Captain! our _____ trip is done,"
2. "The _____ has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is _____,"
3. "The port is near, the _____ I hear, the people all exulting,"
4. "While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and _____,"
5. "But O heart! heart! heart!"
6. "O the bleeding drops of red,"
7. "Where on the _____ my Captain lies,"
8. "Fallen _____ and dead."
9. "O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the _____;"
10. "Rise up — for you the flag is flung — for you the bugle trills,"
11. "For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths — for you the shores a-crowding,"
12. "For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning,"
13. "Here, Captain! dear _____!"
14. "This arm beneath your head;"
15. "It is some dream that on the _____"
16. "You've _____ cold and dead."

Answer Key - Fill in the Blank Activity

1. "O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,"
2. "The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won,"
3. "The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,"
4. "While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring,"
5. "But O heart! heart! heart!"
6. "O the bleeding drops of red,"
7. "Where on the deck my Captain lies,"
8. "Fallen cold and dead."
9. "O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;"
10. "Rise up — for you the flag is flung — for you the bugle trills,"
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12. "For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning,"
13. "Here, Captain! dear father!"
14. "This arm beneath your head;"
15. "It is some dream that on the deck"
16. "You've fallen cold and dead."

Student Text

Please read the following paragraph to learn more.

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.

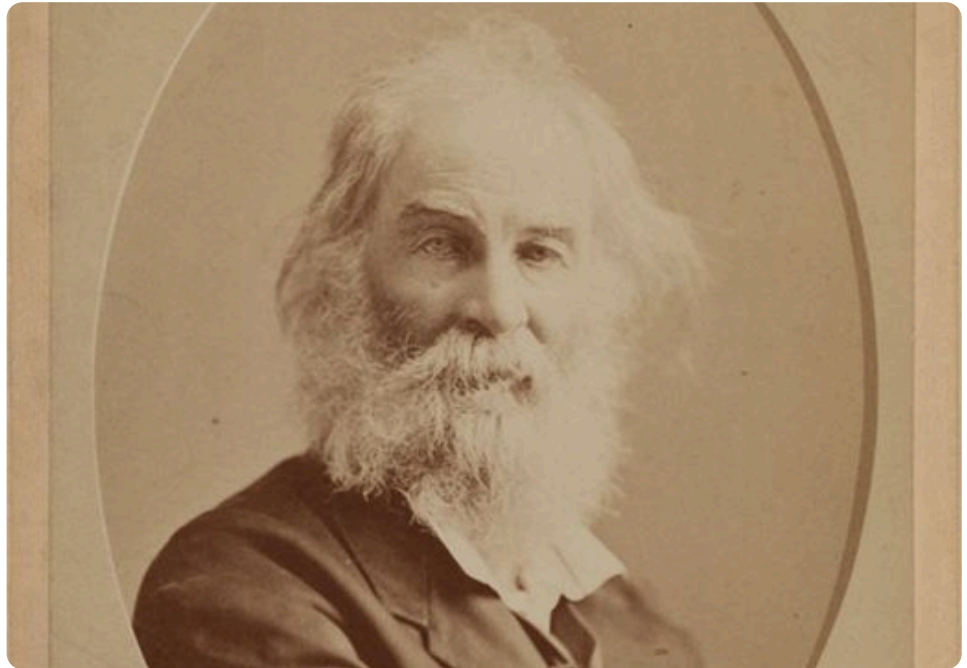


Resources

- <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).)

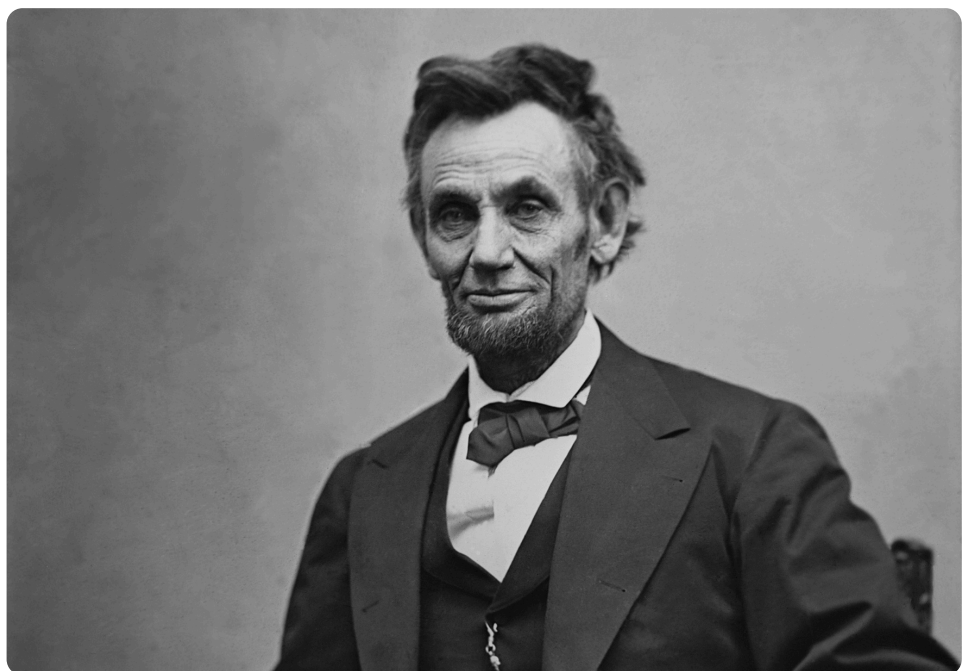
Images

Walt Whitman



Credit: Whitman Archive

Abraham Lincoln



Credit: Canva Pro.

Images

**John Wilkes
Booth**



Credit: Wikipedia

Notes