

Whitman and Lincoln

Written by the National Portrait Gallery and the Choral Arts Society of Washington

Target Grade Level: Grades 4–12 in United States history classes.

Background Information for Teachers:

Whitman and Lincoln Connection

What Walt Whitman sought in his poetry, Abraham Lincoln fulfilled for the poet in practice. For Whitman, Lincoln embodied the two themes on which he based his poetry: the primacy of the individual and the American Union.

In Washington, D.C., Whitman was a close observer of the president during official functions and as the president moved around the city: “I never see the man without feeling that he is one to become personally attached to, for his combination of purest, heartiest tenderness, and native western form of manliness.”

Whitman never met Lincoln but identified intensely with him as the president led the Union in wartime. Whitman wrote, “I love President Lincoln,” and the power of his identification with the politician flowed into his great mourning poem, “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d,” written in 1865 for the assassinated president.

Source:

Label text, “One Life: Walt Whitman, a kosmos” at the National Portrait Gallery, July 1, 2006–March 11, 2007

The Importance of “Beat! Beat! Drums!”

“Beat! Beat! Drums!” first appeared in the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* in 1861. Visit the Walt Whitman Archive site below to learn more about Whitman’s reason for writing this poem.

“Beat! Beat! Drums!” *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* September 24, 1861, 4. This poem was reprinted in the *New York Leader*, September 28, 1861; *Harper’s Weekly Magazine*, September 28, 1861; and *Drum-Taps* (1865).

Source:

The Walt Whitman Archive:

http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/periodical/periodical_title/per.00156

Teacher Prep

Familiarize yourself with the following:

- “Beat! Beat! Drums!” poem
- *Such Was the War* lyrics and programs notes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance
- Analyze poetry and song
- Compare the characteristics of two portraits that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context
- Communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

National Standards

Visual Art Standard 3: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

Visual Art Standard 4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and culture

Music Standard 6: Listening to, analyzing, and describing music

Music Standard 9: Understanding music in relation to history and culture

US History Standard 22: Understands the course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people

Prior Knowledge

- The students are familiar with the Civil War.
- The students have responded in writing or verbally to works of art.

Materials

- Portraits of Walt Whitman can be found at the National Portrait Gallery’s online exhibition “One Life: Walt Whitman, a kosmos”:<http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/whitman/index.html>
- Portraits of Abraham Lincoln can be found at the National Portrait Gallery’s online exhibition “One Life: The Mask of Lincoln.”
<http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/lincoln/>
- *Reading Portraiture* Guide for Educators can be found at:
<http://www.npg.si.edu/educate2/educate23.htm>
- “Beat! Beat! Drums!” *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, can be found at Walt Whitman Archive:http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/periodical/periodical_title/per.00156
- “Beat! Beat! Drums” by Walt Whitman can be found at:
www.choralarts.org/resourcesforteachersandstudents.html
- *Such Was the War* by James Grant audio recording can be found at:
www.choralarts.org/resourcesforteachersandstudents.html
- *Such Was the War* by James Grant lyric sheet can be found at:
www.choralarts.org/resourcesforteachersandstudents.html
- *Such Was the War* by James Grant program notes can be found at:
www.choralarts.org/resourcesforteachersandstudents.html

Lesson Procedures

Portrait Activity

Students analyze portraits of Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman as an introduction to the lives of these two men.

Portrait Reading Formula for Students:

1. Look at the portrait. Analyze the portrait using the National Portrait Gallery's *Reading Portraiture* guide found at <http://www.npg.si.edu/educate2/educate23.htm>.
2. Gather biographical facts from the portrait's symbols and construct the context of the sitter's life.
3. Use Web resources and available books to research the sitter's life and historical contributions.
4. Compare the facts gathered from the portrait with the researched facts and share with classmates.

*Each of these steps may be done as a class, in small groups, or individually.

Dialogue Activity – Extension #1

- Have students determine if they think Lincoln and Whitman ever met. Tell the students that Walt Whitman worked as a nurse during the Civil War in the Patent Office Building and that Lincoln held his second inaugural ball in the same building (now home to the National Portrait Gallery).
- Have the students read Walt Whitman's poem "Beat! Beat! Drums!"
- Lead a discussion about what this poem means to the students.
- Have the students read the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* in the Background Information for Teachers section as an introduction to "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and to Whitman's reason for writing the poem.
- With this new knowledge, lead a discussion regarding the meaning of the poem.
- Confirm with students that Lincoln and Whitman never met, but that Whitman admired and was inspired by Lincoln.
- If Lincoln and Whitman met, what would they say to each other? Students should work in groups to create a dialogue between the two men.
- Students should present dialogues to the class.

Music Activity – Extension #2

- Provide the students with the lyrics of *Such Was the War* by James Grant.
- Have the students locate all of the sections of the piece where the lines from “Beat! Beat! Drums!” appear.
- Ask the student to discuss why they think the stanzas of “Beat! Beat! Drums!” appear throughout the lyrics of the song. Ask the students to consider what they think the composer was trying to convey by using these lyrics.
- Have the students read (or read to them) the program notes to *Such Was the War*, written by James Grant.
- Play the recording of *Such Was the War* for the students.
- After listening to the piece, have students reflect on the lesson by completing the following writing prompt:

*Imagine that President Lincoln traveled through time to hear the premiere of *Such Was the War* by James Grant performed by The Choral Arts Society of Washington in 2003 (www.choralarts.org/resourcesforteachersandstudents.html). What would Lincoln think about the piece? How would he react to the use of Walt Whitman’s poetry as the lyrics of this piece? What would he think about the composition’s musical and poetic imagery about the Civil War? Imagine that after hearing the concert, Lincoln returned in time to 1864, the height of the Civil War, and wrote a letter to Whitman about what he experienced. What would Lincoln want to tell Whitman? Write a letter from President Abraham Lincoln to Walt Whitman about *Such Was the War*. Be sure to include in your letter your impressions of the use of “Beat! Beat! Drums” as part of the composition.*