

Whitman/Lincoln Lilacs Lesson Plan (7th or 8th Grade)

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Objectives:

1. Introduce students to Walt Whitman as an American poet and one who had great respect and admiration for Abraham Lincoln.
2. Interpret the poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” for the tone and message Whitman portrays concerning Lincoln’s death.
3. Make connections between the poem and the Lincoln lilac plant.

Materials

Introductory guide worksheet
Copies of biography excerpts
Copies of poem worksheet

*Note: These plans are for a 50-60 minute class period. To increase classroom instruction time, assign the introductory guide worksheet as homework the night before.

Web Resources

<http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:iZ3SiHluUO8J:march.rutgers.edu/docs/HarvestsFromOldSite/Walt%2520Whitman%2520Lesson%2520Plans/Whitman%2520and%2520Lincoln,%2520for%2520Pres%2520Day.doc+Where+Lilacs+Last+in+the+Dooryard+Bloom%27d+lesson+plans&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3&gl=us>

The Walt Whitman Archive

<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/whitman/biography/>
http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/classroom/lesson_whitman.html
<http://www.lilacfestival.com/2007%20Lilac%20Website/Other%20Flowers.html>

Procedures:

1. 8-12 minutes

Students will complete the *Make Connections* portion of the guide sheet. The teacher will then lead brief discussion of the students’ responses, with the goal of helping the students connect to a sense of loss and how objects bring back memories of something lost as they will read in the poem. The teacher will also tell students which of the flowers is a lilac and ask which students have seen lilac plants before.

2. 4 minutes

The teacher will write the following true statements on the board:

Walt Whitman was a poet.

Walt Whitman respected Abraham Lincoln.

President Lincoln was assassinated in the spring of 1865.

Lilacs bloom in the spring.

The teacher will then have the students hypothesize how Whitman and Lincoln are connected and what the poem, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is about. Students must link all four statements in their hypothesis.

Possible response: Walt Whitman wrote a poem about his respect for President Lincoln and how lilacs were blooming when Lincoln was assassinated.

3. 15-25 minutes

The students will read the Walt Whitman biography and complete the true/false chart. Optional: Can be completed with a partner or in a small group. Answers can be on the board for students to come up and check when finished.

Vocabulary for biography:

eclectic Said of a style of writing or art, or a set of beliefs: selecting material or ideas from a wide range of sources or authorities

vignettes A short literary essay, especially one describing a person's character

inauguration To place (a person) in office with a formal ceremony

secession The act of withdrawing formally, eg from a political or religious body or alliance.

superficial Belonging or relating to, or on or near, the surface

clerical Relating to clerks, office workers or office work

perseverance the act of continued effort to achieve something one has begun, despite setbacks

elegy A mournful or thoughtful song or poem, especially one whose subject is death or loss.

4. 20-25 minutes

In either small groups or partners, assign the students to interpret stanzas 1, 2, 3, and 6 of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” by completing the poem worksheet. Read each stanza aloud to the entire class before the students break into groups or partners.

1

WHEN lilacs last in the door-yard 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.

O ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring;
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the
west,
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!
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my
soul!

3

In the door-yard 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 door-yard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms, and heart-shaped

leaves of rich green,
A sprig, with its flower, I break.

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,
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;
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.

Vocabulary for poem:

trinity: A group of three

perennial: (of plants) having a life cycle lasting more than two years

flambeau: a pole dipped in wax and set alight as a flaming torch, used in processions at festivals

sombre: Sad and serious; grave.

dirge: A funeral song or hymn

Perpetual: constant, continuous

5. In closing, explain that the Lincoln lilac plant is a deep sky-blue variety of the lilac plant named after President Lincoln. (For more information on the Lincoln lilac, see website below.) Ask the students the following exit questions:

- Who was Walt Whitman?
- Why did he admire President Abraham Lincoln?
- What is the connection between lilacs, Lincoln, and Whitman?

Walt Whitman Biography

Excerpted from http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/classroom/lesson_whitman.html

Born in 1819 during the "Era of Good Feeling", Walt Whitman was raised on Jacksonian democracy. Walt Whitman, Sr., trained his children as "radical Democrats, on the side of the farmer, the laborer, the small tradesman."

Walt Whitman's formal education ended when he was 11 and he became an office boy in a New York law firm. With the lawyers' encouragement he became an eclectic reader. Frequent attendance at concerts, art galleries, and the theater completed his education. In the years that followed Whitman worked as a printer, schoolteacher, carpenter, and journalist--always observing and absorbing the life around him.



More and more Whitman came to feel that the strength of the republic lay not in its leaders but in its hardworking, patriotic citizens. Always carrying a little notebook, he observed those citizens, jotting impressions of everyday scenes. From those vignettes he fashioned twelve unnamed poems, which he self-published in 1855 under the title *Leaves of Grass*.

The year 1861 brought the inauguration of a new President, Abraham Lincoln--finally a leader whom Whitman could respect. The poet admired Lincoln's humble beginnings and his commitment to the union. The year also brought secession of the confederate states and war.

The war touched Whitman personally after his brother George joined the 51st New York Volunteers. When the *New York Herald* listed George among those wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, Whitman raced to Washington.

Fortunately, George had received only a superficial wound. Nevertheless, Whitman stayed in the camp for two weeks, visiting the wounded and listening to their stories... Whitman accompanied the wounded to Washington's hospitals where he began visiting them almost daily--a practice he continued for the next three years. He listened to their complaints, fed them, and wrote letters home.

Whitman's poem "The Wound Dresser" attests to his hospital experiences. To finance his stay, the poet worked part-time in the Army Paymaster's Office. Later he obtained clerical jobs in the Department of the Interior and the Attorney General's Office.

Most often Whitman visited the Armory Square Hospital because it contained "by far the worst cases, most repulsive wounds, has the most suffering, and most need of consolation." Another famous visitor to Armory Square was President Lincoln, whom the poet admired more and more for his perseverance during the war. Although he never met Lincoln, Whitman sometimes saw the President passing on the street.

By his own estimate Whitman ministered to thousands of sick and wounded soldiers. Whitman always carried his little notebook where, "nearly blind with tears", he jotted stories and reactions to scenes in the hospital and on battlefields.

The end of the war brought relief, optimism, and for Whitman, a belief that the revitalized union would initiate a new era of political and social justice.

Jubilation over the union victory gave way to national grief over the assassination of President Lincoln. Devastated by the loss, Whitman wrote "O Captain! My Captain!"--a poem he repeatedly was asked to read during the Lincoln lectures of his later years. The poet himself preferred his elegy "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd".

In 1873 Whitman suffered a stroke and went to live with his brother George in Camden, New Jersey. ...

Despite declining health, he continued to travel, lecture on Abraham Lincoln, write, and revise *Leaves of Grass* until the last edition shortly before his death in 1892.

Name _____

**“When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d”
By Walt Whitman**

1

WHEN lilacs last in the door-yard 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.

O ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring;
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the
west,
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!
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my
soul!

3

In the door-yard 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 door-yard,
With delicate-color’d blossoms, and heart-shaped
leaves of rich green,
A sprig, with its flower, I break.

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,
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;
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.

Directions: Read the stanzas and answer the questions.

1

Circle the three things spring will bring to the poet each year.

Recalling what you learned in the Whitman biography, who is
Whitman mourning in this poem?

Why did he have “loving” (respectful) thoughts about him?

2

Why do you think the poet uses so many exclamation points in
this stanza?

What is one word to describe the poet’s emotions in this
stanza?

3

Underline what the poet loves about lilacs.

Summarize: In this stanza, the poet sees a lilac bush in the
_____ of an old _____. He
decides to _____ off a sprig of it.

6

Circle the words that show the emotions of the scene Whitman
describes in this stanza.

Whitman is describing Lincoln’s coffin processional. What
does he do as the coffin passes by him?

Looking back at the lilac’s description in stanza 3 and
remembering why Whitman admired Lincoln, why do you
think the poet chose a lilac to put on the Lincoln’s coffin?

Whitman/Lincoln Introduction Guide – Lesson Worksheet

Name _____

Make Connections: Think about a time when you experienced the loss of someone or something. Maybe that person moved away, that person or pet passed away, or you lost the pet or object. Make a list of words under each category to describe your experience.

<u>Emotions you felt</u>	<u>Thoughts you had</u>	<u>Actions you took</u>
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Do certain objects, places, smells, etc. bring memories of what you lost back into your mind? If so, describe here.

Which of the following flowers is a lilac? Circle your best guess.



Biography directions: Read the biography on Walt Whitman. Based on the information you learn, label each statement as either true or false. If the statement is false, write the information that would make the statement true.

	<u>True</u>	or	<u>False (If false, write the true fact.)</u>
1. Walt Whitman was an American poet.	_____		_____
2. Lincoln became president in 1862.	_____		_____
3. Whitman stopped attending school at age 11.	_____		_____
4. Whitman always carried a camera with him.	_____		_____
5. Whitman respected Lincoln for his wealth and height.	_____		_____
6. Whitman’s brother was wounded in the Civil War.	_____		_____
7. Whitman visited wounded Civil War soldiers in hospitals almost daily for three years.	_____		_____
8. Whitman met Lincoln in 1863.	_____		_____
9. Of the poems he wrote about Lincoln, Whitman preferred the poem, “O Captain! My Captain!”	_____		_____
10. Whitman lectured about Lincoln for many years.	_____		_____

Whitman/Lincoln Introduction Guide – Lesson Worksheet Answers

Name _____

Make Connections: Think about a time when you experienced the loss of someone or something. Maybe that person moved away, that person or pet passed away, or you lost the pet or object. Make a list of words under each category to describe your experience.

Emotions you felt	Thoughts you had	Actions you took

Do certain objects, places, smells, etc. bring memories of what you lost back into your mind? If so, describe here.

Possible response: Whenever I watch the movie, Finding Nemo, I think of my best friend, Katie, who moved to Florida because that was her favorite movie.

Which of the following flowers is a lilac? Circle your best guess.



Biography directions: Read the biography on Walt Whitman. Based on the information you learn, label each statement as either true or false. If the statement is false, write the information that would make the statement true.

	<u>True</u>	or <u>False</u> (If false, write the true fact.)
1. Walt Whitman was an American poet.	<u>True</u>	_____
2. Lincoln became president in 1862.	<u>False</u>	<u>Lincoln became president in 1861.</u>
3. Whitman stopped attending school at age 11.	<u>True</u>	_____
4. Whitman always carried a camera with him.	<u>False</u>	<u>He always carried a notebook.</u>
5. Whitman respected Lincoln for his wealth and height.	<u>False</u>	<u>He admired his humble beginnings and his commitment to the union.</u>
6. Whitman’s brother was wounded in the Civil War.	<u>True</u>	_____
7. Whitman visited wounded Civil War soldiers in hospitals almost daily for three years.	<u>True</u>	_____
8. Whitman met Lincoln in 1863.	<u>False</u>	<u>They never met.</u>
9. Of the poems he wrote about Lincoln, Whitman preferred the poem, “O Captain! My Captain!”	<u>False</u>	<u>He preferred “When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”.</u>
10. Whitman lectured about Lincoln for many years.	<u>True</u>	_____