



# THE CIVIL WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS

## LESSON

Grade Level: 7-12

Subject: History, American Literature and American Civilization

Estimated Time of Required:  
2 (50-60 minute) class periods

## THE CIVIL WAR CLASSROOM MATERIALS

### WALT WHITMAN, PATRIOT POET

#### OVERVIEW

Walt Whitman, journalist and poet, created poems that are boldly American in style and substance. He idealized American leaders and workmen, chronicled Civil War battles, praised 19th Century technology, and memorialized Abraham Lincoln. While his perspective changed as the nation developed, Whitman's poems retained their democratic spirit and faith in the American experiment.

During the Civil War Whitman visited soldiers in Washington, D.C., hospitals, ministering to their needs and recording the experience in newspaper articles, letters, and poems. The poet considered his years with the wounded soldiers the defining period of his life.

#### ACTIVITY OBJECTIVES

In this lesson students will have an opportunity to

- analyze historic events and concepts recorded in Whitman's poems
- examine conditions in Civil War hospitals and the poet's reactions to those conditions
- evaluate Whitman's role as poet, historian, and American visionary

#### RESOURCES NEEDED

Episode 6 of *The Civil War* series, highly recommended but not required.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (<http://www.bartleby.com/142/>) or print copy.

#### RELEVANT STANDARDS

This lesson addresses national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>).

##### History

- Understands the sources and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum period.
- Understands the causes of the Civil War.
- Understands the course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people.
- Language Arts
- Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- Demonstrates competence in the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
- Gathers and uses information for research purposes.
- Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts.
- Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of informational texts.

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#### INTRODUCTION

*"I know very well that my "Leaves" could not possibly have emerged or been fashioned or completed from any other era than the latter half of the 19th Century, nor any other land than democratic America and from the absolute triumph of the National Union Arms."*

— W. Whitman

"I hear America singing!" Walt Whitman proclaimed in an early poem. The song honors American mechanics, carpenters, boatmen, ploughboys—the "divine average" who, for Whitman, embodied democracy. Other poems in *Leaves of Grass* celebrate American industry, innovation, and expansion. Yet for the patriot poet the defining event of his life and poetry was the Civil War, when he visited sick and wounded soldiers in Washington, D. C. hospitals.

Born in 1819 during the "Era of Good Feeling", 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.

Early 19th century optimism gave way to the turbulent 1850s, when sectional conflict—especially over the issue of slavery— threatened to destroy the nation. Strongly devoted to the union, Whitman found the country's political leadership ineffectual, calling Presidents Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan "our topmost warning and shame."

Frustrated by compromises over the extension of slavery into the western territories, Whitman joined the Free Soil Party. He particularly despised the Fugitive Slave Act. In his poem "Boston Ballad" he recounted the case of Anthony Burns, an escaped slave, who was arrested and imprisoned in Boston and returned to his owner in Virginia. At the same time, he branded both secessionists and abolitionists " radicals".

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*. Throughout his life he would add, revise, rearrange and republish the poems until the deathbed edition in 1892.

Whitman's first edition of *Leaves* erupted on the literary scene. A democratic spirit infused his poems as he chronicled all facets of American life from the significant to the mundane. He boldly celebrated the body and soul of the average American—and his own.

Ignoring traditional rhyme and meter, Whitman spoke directly to the reader in the manner of revival leaders and political orators of his day. Using the ubiquitous "I", he identified with the people and the republic itself. In the opening poem, later entitled "Song of Myself", Whitman wrote:

*I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy.  
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart  
of the same terms.*

As editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Times* in 1857 Whitman commented on the deteriorating political climate of the country. He also continued to write poetry. In the "Year of the Meteors", 1859-60, he describes the trial of abolitionist John Brown. A new 1860 edition of *Leaves* opened with

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the Proto-Leaf (later “Starting from Paumanok”) in which the poet declares:

*I will make a song for These States, that no one State may under any  
circumstances be subjected to another State,  
And I will make a song that there shall be comity by day and by  
night between all The States, and between any two of them,  
And I will make a song of the organic bargains of These States—  
And a shrill song of curses on him who would dissever the Union.  
Whitman, the poet, tried to accomplish what political leaders could not: preserve the union.*

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.

After the first Battle of Bull Run (July 1861), Whitman wrote, “Beat! Beat! Drum!” as a recruiting poem. He endorsed the Civil War as a catharsis which would purge the nation of political corruption and preserve the union.

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. Failing to find his brother in one of the city’s makeshift hospitals, he traveled to the Union camp at Falmouth, Va., near Fredericksburg.

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. Their descriptions of the Battle of Fredericksburg are recorded in the poem, “The Artilleryman’s Vision.” 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. Describing his hospital role, Whitman wrote:

*I supply often to some of these dear, suffering boys in my presence and magnetism that which doctors  
nor medicines nor skills nor routine assistance can give. I can testify that friendship has literally cured a  
fever and the medicine of daily affection, a bad wound.*

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.

When Whitman arrived in Washington, 43 facilities were used as hospitals. Schools, hotels, abandoned barracks, privately owned mansions, and government offices were converted to house the wounded.

Often Whitman stayed with soldiers during and after amputations. In that pre-antiseptic era doctors sometimes failed to clean wounds properly and infections set in, making amputation necessary. He was struck by the stoicism and fortitude of the stricken soldiers. After one night visiting patients at the Patent Office Hospital, he recorded:

*As I stood by the bedside of a Pennsylvania soldier who lay, conscious of quick approaching death, yet  
perfectly calm and with noble, spiritual manner, the veteran surgeon, turning aside, said to me that  
though he had witnessed many, many deaths of soldiers and had been a worker at Bull Run, Antietam,  
Fredericksburg, etc., he had not seen yet the first case of man or boy that met the approach of dissolution  
with cowardly qualms or terror. My own observation fully bears out these remarks.*

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

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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.

I see the President often. I think better of him than many do. He has conscience and homely shrewdness; conceals an enormous tenacity under his mild, gawky Western manner. The difficulties of his situation have been unprecedented in the history of statesmanship. That he has conserved the government so far is a miracle.

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. These impressions were recorded in *Drum Taps*, a book of Civil War poems. He also published articles in the *New York Times* and *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, providing a historical record of Washington during the war.

By January 1, 1865, the *Daily Morning Chronicle* reported that over 18,000 soldiers had died in Washington hospitals during the war. Of that number, 3,421 were victims of gunshot wounds, 2,255 typhoid fever, 1,370 chronic diarrhea, and 560 amputation. Whitman, who had watched many of them die, provided a moving obituary in his poem “Ashes of Soldiers”.

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.

It is certain to me that the United States, by virtue of that war and its results—and through them and them only—are now ready to enter . . . upon their genuine career in history, as no more torn and divided in their spinal requisites, but a great homogeneous Nation—free states all—a moral and political unity in variety, such as Nature shows in her grandest physical works, and as much greater than the merely physical.

His poem “Turn O Libertad” celebrated the war’s end and promised a “future greater than all past.” 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 Lilac’s Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”. In both poems the poet is no longer the central figure; instead, the tragedy of Lincoln’s death dominates.

In 1873 Whitman suffered a stroke and went to live with his brother George in Camden, New Jersey. Later he bought a little house on Mickle Street where he hosted a stream of literary figures and admirers. 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.

In his final years Whitman saw himself “not as a verbal adventurer . . . but as a prophet and man of wisdom.” Often he remarked to friends, “the war saved me”. The statement puzzled critics, since most of his best poems were written before the Civil War. But for Whitman, the experience of visiting the wounded in Washington hospitals confirmed his faith in “the divine average”: the strength of the republic lay in the spirit, conduct, and quiet heroism of its citizens. That spirit would unite the nation.

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#### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Read a historic account of one major Civil War battle. Select a poem from “Drum Taps” which best describes the conflict. Indicate how the poem captures the battle scene both visually and emotionally.
- Read about Union efforts to enlist troops for the War. Create a poster to illustrate the recruiting poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!”
- After reading “The Wound Dresser”, write an account of tending the wounded for publication in a city newspaper in 1862.
- Compare statistics on Civil War casualties with those of other U. S. wars. Using information on Whitman’s work in Washington hospitals and the essay “Civil War: Wounded City” (<http://www.exploredc.org/index.php?id=113>), conclude why Civil War casualties were higher than those in any other American conflict.
- Compare Walt Whitman’s work in Washington hospitals during the Civil War with that of Red Cross founder Clara Barton.

#### Memories of President Lincoln

- Analyze one of the poems written in response to the death of Abraham Lincoln: “O Captain! My Captain!” or “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”. Indicate how the content and style of the poem reflect the impact of the President’s life on the nation as well as grief over his loss.
- Write an obituary for the slain President. Compare your article with one of Whitman’s poems memorializing Lincoln.

#### Writing Style

- Compare the writing style of a pre-Civil War poem with that of a poem written after the War. Show how the author’s style reflects changes in the national attitude and in the poet’s own perspective.
- After reading one of Whitman’s early poems, write a first-person prose poem celebrating some aspect of contemporary American life, such as work, recreation, scenery, or charitable activities.

#### Patriotic Vision

- How accurate was Whitman as a national prophet? Find a poem which you feel describes contemporary America, fulfilling the poet’s vision of the future.