

Teaching Guide

SEGMENT 5, WEBISODE 4

Please note: Each segment in this Webisode has its own Teaching Guide



Segment Overview

By 1850, America's movement toward urbanization had begun; only 85 percent of Americans lived on farms, and within a decade the nation would boast more than forty cities of over 20,000 people. American ingenuity created modern publishing technology that brought books to the common people in unprecedented numbers, and the nation's writers created a uniquely American literary culture worthy of the new nation. People around the globe read American authors such as Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, Thoreau, and Emerson. And in 1855, a new poet appeared on the American scene whose work—both celebrated and reviled—exerted an important influence on American letters.

In his groundbreaking collection *Leaves of Grass*, poet Walt Whitman defied traditional poetic forms and style to create a new, democratic American verse. He assumed for himself the role of American Poet, giving voice to the new nation. His poems celebrated democracy and the worth of the individual, praised the human body, and glorified the senses. Whitman cultivated an image of himself as a common man both in his writing and in the relatively new medium of photography, which he also embraced. While best known for his poetry, Whitman also wrote prose, which ranged from political theory to nature essays. He continued to add to and revise *Leaves of Grass*, publishing multiple editions until his death in 1892.

Teacher Directions

1. Ask the students the following questions.

- How did America change from 1790 to 1860?
- What professions did Whitman practice before publishing *Leaves of Grass*?
- How do you think these jobs helped him grow and develop as a writer?
- Why is Whitman called an “American poet” with a uniquely “American voice”?

2. Make sure students understand the following points in discussing the questions.

In the relatively short span of seventy years—from 1790 to 1860—America moved toward urbanization, with more people living in cities. While most Americans still lived on farms—especially in the south—the nation boasted dozens of cities of over 20,000 people. Walt Whitman, a largely self-taught



Let's Discuss

writer and a voracious reader, worked as a printer, teacher, newspaper reporter, and editor before publishing *Leaves of Grass*. He sought to capture the energy, diversity, and optimism of the nation in his poems. His work celebrated the individual, the common man, and the concept of democracy. “The United States themselves,” Whitman declared, “are essentially the greatest poem.”

Teacher Directions

1. Distribute the Student Sheet: *I Hear America Singing*. Read the poem aloud while students read along silently. Help students with any difficult vocabulary (i.e., blithe, mason, ploughboy, etc.).
2. Discuss the following questions with students.
 - What jobs does Whitman mention?
 - Why does the poet use singing as the theme of his poem? What does singing stand for?
 - What picture does the poet paint of America? What kind of country does he show?
 - What mood does the poem express?
 - Does the poet believe each person is important? How does he express this?
 - Look at the style of the poem. Does it rhyme? Does it have a rhythm?
 - Why do you think Whitman wrote this kind of verse to express his idea of America?
3. Make sure students understand the following points about the poem.

Whitman celebrates the individual and work (especially the labor of the common man) by portraying a number of men and women at their jobs: the mechanic, carpenter, mason, boatman, shoemaker, hatter, woodcutter, ploughboy, mother, wife. His characters are singing—an expression of their individuality, optimism, and joy in their labors. He paints America as a nation rich with skilled, contented citizens. While each individual is heard, they are joined together in one diverse choir that makes up the nation. Whitman paints the dignity of all labor—even the work of those who are considered low on the social scale. America is a land of opportunity that presents every man or woman the chance to work in his or her chosen field, echoing the rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” outlined in the Declaration of Independence. The poem’s mood is optimistic and upbeat. The poem does not rhyme or have a set meter, but it is musical and rhythmical. It is a new form of verse, suited to a nation that was itself an experiment in democracy.

4. Distribute the Student Sheet: *Whitman and His Butterflies*. Read the sheet with students and stimulate class discussion of the questions embedded in the text.



History Sleuth

5. Using the information gained from reading the two student sheets, students create their own Whitman-like card combining the literary and visual arts. Students may choose to write a poem stylistically similar to Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" about their own neighborhood, or the teacher may assign another topic.

Note to the Teacher: If students would like to create a butterfly, show them how to fold a piece of paper in half and draw the wings and thin body shape to create a symmetrical cutout.

Teacher Directions

Discuss the following question with students.

- If you were to write a poem about America today, what individuals and professions would you include? Why?

Teacher Directions

1. Distribute the Student Sheet: *Walt Whitman and Slavery*. While students follow along, read the segment of "Song of Myself" to students. Help students with difficult vocabulary (limpsy, plasters, galls, fire-lock).
2. Students discuss the following questions.
 - In what way is the runaway active? In what way is he passive?
 - How does the poet portray himself?
 - How does the poet reveal that he trusts the slave to do him no harm?
 - How does the poet seem to feel about slavery?
 - How did Walt Whitman move America toward freedom?
3. Make sure students understand the following points in discussing this segment of the poem.

The runaway has been an active agent in his own freedom, and is physically exhausted. He is also frightened, and his eyes dart about. He allows the narrator to care for his physical needs. The poet portrays himself as an active agent in encouraging the freedom of the runaway. He reveals that he trusts the slave not to harm him or steal from him; he lets the runaway live with him for a week, and leaves his gun in plain sight. The poet, whose actions demonstrate his conviction that slavery is wrong, shows his commitment to equality by eating with the runaway and tending



What do you
Think?



Moving Toward
Freedom

to his wounds. Whitman helped move America toward freedom by portraying the ugliness of slavery and the great value of freedom. In this excerpt, Whitman attempted to portray enslaved African Americans as strong, dignified, trustworthy people who have been unjustly enslaved.

Teacher Directions

Use the following activities with your students.

Language Arts — Students read another of Whitman’s well-known poems, “O Captain! My Captain!” about the death of Abraham Lincoln.

Language Arts — Whitman often jotted down his thoughts in notebooks, and filled at least one hundred different notebooks. Some of these notebooks he made himself by folding or cutting paper and fastening with a pin or ribbon. Students create their own notebooks and write short daily journal entries.

Science — Whitman visited sick soldiers during the Civil War in a hospital in Washington, D.C., and often wrote letters home for them. Students read about civil war medicine.

Math — Students create a graph showing the following statistics. In 1790, only 5% of Americans lived in cities, and 95% lived on farms. In 1830, approximately 90% of Americans lived in rural environments. By 1870, less than 75% of Americans lived on farms. In 1830, 10% of Americans lived in urban environments; by 1870, almost 30% of Americans lived in urban environments. In 1910, 50% of Americans lived in cities. In 1950, only 30% of Americans lived on farms, and 70% lived in urban areas.



Connections

I Hear America Singing

by Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and
strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand
singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing
as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or
at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of
the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day--at night the party of young fellows,
robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.



Whitman and His Butterflies

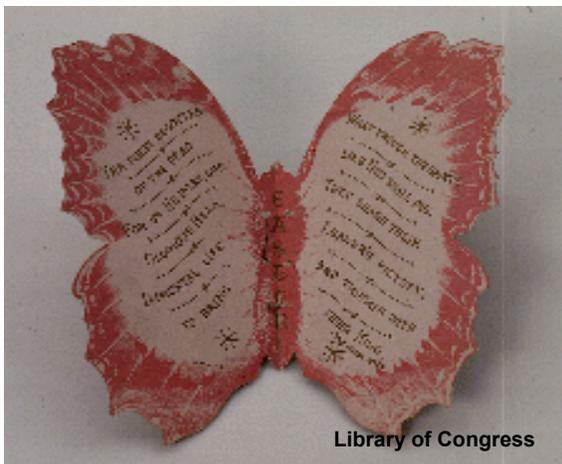
Whitman loved the new art of photography and had his photograph taken many times. This is one of his favorite photos of himself. At various times, he claimed the moth was real and that he had tamed it, but it was obviously a photographic prop. Do you think he was joking?



Library of Congress

Whitman liked to portray himself as being one with nature, and the image of a butterfly perched on a finger appears in later editions of his famous *Leaves of Grass*. What do you think the butterfly might represent? (Some think that the butterfly represents the poet's soul, which he is happily contemplating and displaying.)

Whitman liked to combine the visual arts with the poetic arts. Why do you think he liked to do this? He drew this butterfly on paper, cut it out, and wrote a religious poem on it to create an Easter card. What do you think the butterfly symbolized?



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Walt Whitman and Slavery

Walt Whitman lived in the North for most of his life. But he saw the evils of slavery and the slave market firsthand while living briefly in New Orleans. He sympathized with efforts to end the enslavement of African Americans and save the Union. During the Civil War, he visited wounded soldiers in hospitals. In this passage from his poem "Song of Myself," Whitman describes an encounter with a man escaping slavery.

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy
and weak,
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,
And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and
bruis'd feet,
And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him
some coarse clean clothes,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,
I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.

