

A House Divided: Civil War

Looking at Lincoln

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the power of metaphor and the challenge of depicting a historical figure.

Age Group/Grade Level: 12-13 years, grades 7-8

Subject Area: English/Language Arts, Social Studies, Visual Arts

Duration: approximately 45 min.

Background

Originally published in the *New-York Saturday Press* on November 4, 1865, the poem "O Captain! My Captain!" captures Walt Whitman's despair over the assassination of President Lincoln. It was intended for a wide readership, so the poem's style differs from Whitman's other work, which was written largely in free verse. After 16 years of slight revisions, the poem finally appeared in his book *Leaves of Grass*.

Abraham Lincoln was the first U.S. president to use photography as part of his election campaign; he even credited photographer Mathew Brady with winning him the election. According to *TIME* magazine (<http://tinyurl.com/TimeonLincoln>), scholars estimate that Lincoln sat for 33 photographers and 127 portraits in his lifetime.

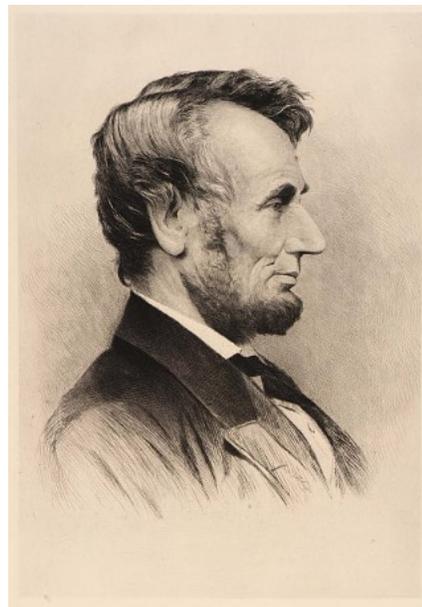
Discussion

Have students search "Abraham Lincoln" on the Smithsonian American Art Museum website (<http://www.americanart.si.edu/collections/search/>). Open discussion by asking students:

- How would you summarize the similarities and differences between these portraits?
- Why might Lincoln be depicted in so many different ways?

Have students select one artwork (making sure to have a wide range of depictions), then quickly research the artist and the time period in which the artwork was made. As a large group, have students share the results of their research and discuss:

- What was going on in the United States at the time your artwork was made?
- What kind of person does Lincoln appear to be in the work you selected?
- What might the challenges be in depicting such a famous man?



Thomas Johnson, [Abraham Lincoln](#), after 1864, etching, plate: 13 x 9 in., Gift of Olin Dows, 1979.136.92.

Activity

Share "O Captain! My Captain!" (on reverse) with students. Explain that the poem was originally published on November 4, 1865, almost seven months after President Lincoln's assassination. In it, Whitman juxtaposes the excitement of winning the Civil War with the bereavement of Lincoln's death.

Have students ascribe moods to different colors, and then highlight "mood" words in order to track the emotional state of the writer throughout the poem. Ask students:

- How would you describe the mood of this poem?

Provide students with the historical background for Whitman's poem.

- What comparisons is the author drawing through his use of metaphor?
- How would you describe the author's feelings toward the captain? If the poet was a painter, how might he paint the captain?

Have students compare their impressions of Abraham Lincoln drawn from "O Captain! My Captain!" with the life masks of Lincoln found at the National Museum of American History at <http://3d.si.edu/tour/looking-clark-mills-life-mask-abraham-lincoln>.

- How does the man's face tell the story of his presidency? How does this parallel Whitman's poem?
- Which medium (photograph, sculpture, words, etc.) is most appropriate for depicting Abraham Lincoln? Why?

O Captain! My Captain!

Walt Whitman, 1865

I.

O CAPTAIN! my captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we
sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people are
exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim
and daring:
 But O heart! heart! heart!
 Leave you not the little spot,
 Where on the deck my captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.

II.

O captain! my captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle
trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the
shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager
faces turning;
 O captain! dear father!
 This arm I push beneath you;
 It is some dream that on the deck,
 You've fallen cold and dead.

III.

My captain does not answer, his lips are pale and
still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor
will;
But the ship, the ship is anchor'd safe, 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 silent tread,
 Walk the spot my captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.