

# Mourning a President

## EXHIBIT LESSON PLAN

### Comparing Poetry: Presidential Deaths of 1865 and 1963

*O Captain! My Captain!* by Walt Whitman

*In Memoriam – J.F.K.* by Jorge Luis Borges

#### Overview:

In this lesson, students will compare two poems written in response to the assassination of two U.S. presidents, do a close reading of them, and then find other poems, music and art that share the same themes and/or purpose.

#### 1. Understanding the Poems

- Define elegy
- Then have them do a close reading of the two poems, both elegies for slain presidents:  
*O Captain! My Captain!* by Walt Whitman  
*In Memoriam – J.F.K.* by Jorge Luis Borges

In close reading, the primary goal is, through careful analysis, to gain a deeper understanding of the text. [Purdue University's Online Writing Lab](#) has an easy to follow step-by-step explanation of how to do a close reading of a poem if your students need a reminder. There are, of course, many other sources of information on this topic, and you should use the one best suited to you, your students and your school district.

- Discuss the style of each of the poems and how it reflects the times in which they were written (1860s and 1960s).
  - Consider the reason an Argentinian would have written a poem for this particular U.S. President; what connections to Argentina (and South America) did Kennedy have?
- Discuss the themes, imagery and motifs found in each poem. How are they similar? How do they differ?
- Discover and discuss the allusions and historical references in *In Memoriam* by Borges.

## 2. Finding Connections

- Have students think about and discuss other literary works that fit the definition of an elegy.
- What music connects to the poems' themes and/or could also be considered elegiac? (You could start with works that were created for Lincoln and Kennedy, but then expand to other people and/or events.)
- Have students find pieces of art that were created as a response to the assassinations of Lincoln and Kennedy; what similar themes do they have to the two poems? How do they also reflect the times in which they were created? What other works have been created as a response to other events/assassinations? How are their themes similar or different?

## 3. Making their own

- Have students write, compose or create their own elegy for someone; it should be inspired in theme, form or otherwise by one of the other works discussed in #2.

The following is a list of ELA and Social Studies TEKS that align with this lesson. There may be others. We encourage teachers to think creatively about classroom connections.

### English Language Arts & Reading

#### Middle School

- 110.18.b.4, 15B
- 110.19.b.4, 15B
- 110.20.b.4, 15B
- 110.22.b.1A,D, 5–9
- 110.23.b.1A,D, 5 –9
- 110.24.b.1A,D, 5–9

#### High School

- 110.31.b.2A,C, 3, 14B
- 110.32.b.2A,C, 3, 14B
- 110.33.b.2A,C, 3, 14B
- 110.34.b.2A,C, 3, 14B

### Social Studies

#### Middle School

- 113.17.b17, 18
- 113.20.b26B, C

#### High School

- 113.41.b25
- 113.42.b26

## **O Captain! My Captain!**

by Walt Whitman (1865)

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
    But O heart! heart! heart!  
    O the bleeding drops of red,  
    Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
    Fallen cold and dead.

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;  
    Here Captain! dear father!  
    This arm beneath your head!  
    It is some dream that on the deck,  
    You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, 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 mournful tread,  
    Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
    Fallen cold and dead.

Source: *Leaves of Grass* (David McKay, 1891)

## In Memoriam—J.F.K.

Jorge Luis Borges (1967)

### English:

This bullet is an old one.

In 1897, it was fired at the president of Uruguay by a young man from Montevideo, Avelino Arredondo, who had spent long weeks without seeing anyone so that the world might know that he acted alone. Thirty years earlier, Lincoln had been murdered by that same ball, by the criminal or magical hand of an actor transformed by the words of Shakespeare into Marcus Brutus, Caesar's murderer. In the mid-seventeenth century, vengeance had employed it for the assassination of Sweden's Gustavus Adolphus in the midst of the public hecatomb\* of battle.

In earlier times, the bullet had been other things, because Pythagorean metempsychosis\* is not reserved for humankind alone. It was the silken cord given to viziers in the East, the rifles and bayonets that cut down the defenders of the Alamo, the triangular blade that slit a queen's throat, the wood of the Cross and the dark nails that pierced the flesh of the Redeemer, the poison kept by the Carthaginian chief in an iron ring on his finger, the serene goblet that Socrates drank down one evening.

In the dawn of time it was the stone that Cain hurled at Abel, and in the future it shall be many things that we cannot even imagine today, but that will be able to put an end to men and their wondrous, fragile life.

### Spanish:

Esta bala es antigua.

En 1897 la disparó contra el presidente del Uruguay un muchacho de Montevideo, Arredondo, que había pasado largo tiempo sin ver a nadie, para que lo supieran sin cómplice. Treinta años antes, el mismo proyectil mató a Lincoln, por obra criminal o mágica de un actor, a quien las palabras de Shakespeare habían convertido en Marco Bruto, asesino de César. Al promediar el siglo XVII la venganza la usó para dar muerte a Gustavo Adolfo de Suecia, en mitad de la pública hecatombe de una batalla.

Antes, la bala fue otras cosas, porque la transmigración pitagórica no sólo es propia de los hombres. Fue el cordón de seda que en el Oriente reciben los visires, fue la fusilería y las bayonetas que destrozaron a los defensores del Álamo, fue la cuchilla triangular que segó el cuello de una reina, fue los oscuros clavos que atravesaron la carne del Redentor y el leño de la Cruz, fue el veneno que el jefe cartaginés guardaba en una sortija de hierro, fue la serena copa que en un atardecer bebió Sócrates.

En el alba del tiempo fue la piedra que Caín lanzó contra Abel y será muchas cosas que hoy ni siquiera imaginamos y que podrán concluir con los hombres y con su prodigioso y frágil destino.

**Hecatomb** – In ancient Greece or Rome, a great public sacrifice, originally of 100 oxen; an extensive loss of life for some cause.

**Metempsychosis** – The supposed transmigration at death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species; Pythagoras was a proponent of this philosophy, as was Schopenhauer, Gödel, James Joyce, and Nietzsche.