

Vorüberlegungen

Kompetenzen und Unterrichtsinhalte:

- Die Schülerinnen und Schüler festigen und erweitern ihre Kenntnisse über amerikanische Schriftsteller.
- Sie lernen Walt Whitman als einen der weltweit bedeutsamen Vertreter der amerikanischen Poesie kennen.
- Sie entwickeln ihre Lesekompetenzen auf der Grundlage verschiedener Genres weiter.
- Sie trainieren das Rezitieren von Gedichten anhand eines bekannten Werks von Walt Whitman.
- Sie setzen sich mit der heutigen Rezeption Whitmans in den USA und Europa auseinander.
- Sie lesen im Hauptwerk Whitmans „Leaves of Grass“ und erkennen dessen Bedeutung für die heutige Zeit.
- Sie wenden verschiedene Sozialformen und Methoden der Textarbeit, darunter Sprachmittlung, an.

Anmerkungen zum Thema:

Das Thema „**Walt Whitman – A World Poet**“ bereichert die Beschäftigung der Schülerinnen und Schüler mit der **Literatur Nordamerikas**. Die Unterrichtseinheit ist geeignet zur direkten **Vorbereitung auf das Abitur**.

Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892) wird noch heute in den USA in der Nachfolge von Homer, Dante und Shakespeare angesehen und als Dichter wie als Mensch verehrt. Junge Amerikaner finden in ihm jenen **Freiheitswillen**, jenes **Demokratieverständnis** sowie andere Verhaltensweisen und Anschauungen, die sie bewundern und selbst besitzen möchten.

„Walt Whitman schrieb Gedichte wie im Rausch. Der Aufbruch Amerikas war ihm alles, der Untergang keine Option, und auch wenn der alte Whitman, von Bürgerkrieg, Krankheit und Armut gebrochen, zusehends düsterer wurde: Seine „**Grashalme**“ dürften das glatte Gegenteil von Donald Trumps Inaugurationsrede sein. Wie ein Liebender hielt er Amerika per se für das Größte, Schönste und Beste.

Sein Amerika war das Land auf der Welt, in dem sich der Einzelne frei entwickeln konnte und ungehindert sprießen wie der Grashalm in der Prärie. *E pluribus unum* – das hieß für ihn: aus vielen freien Grashalmen ein Land. „Ich singe ein Ich, einen einfachen, einzelnen Menschen / Doch das Wort Demokratisch spreche ich aus, das Wort En-Masse“, so steht es in seiner viel zitierten Hymne „**Song of Myself**“, dem berühmtesten Selfie der Weltliteratur.

Doch zu so viel Selbstdarstellung gehört natürlich ein gewisses Maß an Kontrolle: Von seinen Anfängen wollte der Autor der „Grashalme“ später nichts mehr wissen. Der nationale Rhapsode wollte kein Zeitungsschreiber mit „sehr bescheidenen“ Honorarvorstellungen gewesen sein. Insbesondere sein einziger bekannter Roman „Franklin Evans“ von 1842, eine rührselige Temperenzlergeschichte, war ihm peinlich – so wie der Nachwelt eigentlich auch.“

(Quelle: www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/article162240841/Unbekannter-Roman-von-Walt-Whitman-entdeckt.html?wtrid=socialmedia.email.sharebutton)

Auch die **Rezeption Walt Whitmans in Deutschland** ist durch hohe Anerkennung seines Schaffens gekennzeichnet. So wurde 2017 in Deutschland ebenso wie in der Schweiz der erst jüngst wiederentdeckte zweite und sehr beachtenswerte Roman „**Jack Engles Leben und Abenteuer**“ veröffentlicht (Erstveröffentlichung 1852). Das letzte Arbeitsblatt der vorliegenden Unterrichtseinheit nimmt darauf in einer Mediationsaufgabe Bezug.

National und international werden insbesondere Whitmans **demokratische Überzeugungen** gewürdigt, die zur Ausformung der Demokratie in aller Welt beigetragen haben.

Vorüberlegungen

„Walt Whitmans Essay *Demokratische Ausblicke* (1871) (engl.: *Democratic Vistas*) bildet das Herzstück seines kulturkritischen Prosawerks. Whitman setzt sich in ihm kritisch mit der kapitalistischen Kultur und Gesellschaft in den Vereinigten Staaten in der Zeit nach dem Sezessionskrieg auseinander. Da er in dem Essay zugleich „**die amerikanische Idee**“ universalisiert und mit der „**Idee einer egalitären demokratischen Kultur und Gesellschaft überhaupt**“ in Verbindung bringt, hat der Essay sozialprogrammatischen Charakter.“

(Quelle: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demokratische_Ausblicke)

Die Hauptziele der Unterrichtseinheit bestehen, neben dem Kennenlernen eines der bedeutendsten amerikanischen Dichter, in der **Auseinandersetzung der Schülerinnen und Schüler mit der „amerikanischen Idee“** Walt Whitmans und seinen demokratischen Ansichten sowie in deren kritischer Anwendung auf die Gegenwart in den USA.

Literatur und Internet zur Vorbereitung:

Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass. Simon & Brown Book Publishers. 2010.
(die Originalausgabe von 1855)

Walt Whitman: Jack Engles Leben und Abenteuer. Manesse Verlag. München/Zürich 2017.
(Original "The Life and Adventures of Jack Engles")

<http://whitmanarchive.org/>
(umfassende Primär- und Sekundärtexte zum Thema)

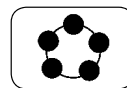
Die einzelnen Unterrichtsschritte im Überblick:

1. Schritt: Introduction – American Writers
2. Schritt: America's World Poet
3. Schritt: O Captain! My Captain!
4. Schritt: A Walk through Leaves of Grass
5. Schritt: The Rediscovery of Jack Engles

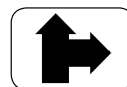
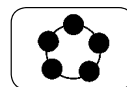
Unterrichtsplanung

1. Schritt: Introduction – American Writers

Die Schülerinnen und Schüler werden in **Texte und Materialien M 1₍₁₎** mit **Aufgabe 1** zum Thema hingeführt. Das **Assignment** regt sie an, ihre Kenntnis bedeutender amerikanischer Schriftstellerinnen und Schriftsteller zu überprüfen und ihr Wissen über sie abzurufen (biografische Angaben, Werke).



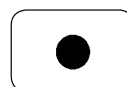
In **Texte und Materialien M 1₍₂₎** werden nur die biografischen Daten als **Lösungsvorschläge** gegeben. Sie können der Klasse zum Beispiel als *Folie* präsentiert werden. Weitere Informationen über die Schriftsteller können von der Klasse hinzugefügt werden, sind an dieser Stelle jedoch eher zweitrangig. Die Lehrkraft kann trotzdem entscheiden, ob zu jedem Autor Details im *Unterrichtsgespräch* zusammengetragen oder in *häuslicher Arbeit* erworben werden sollen. Von dem ebenfalls hier vorgestellten Walt Whitman ausgehend, verweist die Lehrkraft auf die kommenden Lektüren und Aufgaben.



2. Schritt: America's World Poet

Der detaillierte Artikel über Walt Whitman in **Texte und Materialien M 2₍₁₎** bildet den Ausgangspunkt für die Beschäftigung der Lerner mit ihm. Hierzu werden die folgenden **Assignments** aufgegeben:

Aufgabe 1: Der Text soll im *Scanverfahren* gelesen werden, um Antworten auf die in **Texte und Materialien M 2₍₂₎** gestellten Fragen zu finden.



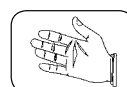
Aufgabe 2: Die *Schülerantworten* können in vollständigen Sätzen oder in Stichpunkten notiert werden. Allerdings werden die Schülerinnen und Schüler aufgefordert, nicht einfach ganze Sätze zu kopieren, sondern in eigenen Worten zu formulieren.



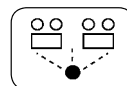
Hinweis: Die Notierung von Stichpunkten hat den die Aufgabe erschwerenden Vorteil, dass die Lerner gezwungen werden, nicht nur simpel vorzulesen, sondern beim Vortragen ihrer Antworten ad hoc Sätze bilden zu müssen.



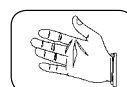
Aufgabe 3: Dies ist eine *Rechercheaufgabe*. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler sollen herausfinden, worum es sich bei *Free Soil* handelt. Die Recherche kann zu Hause am PC, aber auch im Unterricht mit Hilfe des Smartphones erfolgen.



Aufgabe 4: Im Text ist der **Civil War** erwähnt, den Walt Whitman miterlebt und der ihn weitgehend geprägt hat. Ein oder zwei Schülerinnen oder Schüler werden bereits in einer der vorangehenden Unterrichtsstunden damit beauftragt, einen *Kurzvortrag* über den Amerikanischen Bürgerkrieg vorzubereiten und an dieser Stelle zu halten.



Aufgabe 5: Die ebenfalls erwähnte **Emily Dickinson** ist von so herausragender Bedeutung unter den amerikanischen Schriftstellern, dass es sich lohnt, über sie ein *Poster* anfertigen und im Klassenraum aushängen zu lassen.



In **Texte und Materialien M 2₍₃₎** findet die Lehrkraft die in ganzen Sätzen formulierten möglichen Antworten.

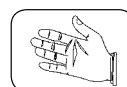
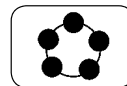
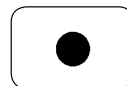
Unterrichtsplanung

In **Texte und Materialien M 5** lesen die Schüler Posts von Lesern ihres Alters. Die durchweg positiven Einträge zeugen von großer Begeisterung und Verehrung für Walt Whitman. Auch wird deutlich, dass junge Amerikaner von heute den historischen Hintergrund des Gedichts kennen. Hierzu gibt es zwei **Assignments**:

Aufgabe 1: Die Posts sollen überblicksartig *gelesen* werden, ohne auf die verkürzte und teilweise inkorrekte Sprache einzugehen. Wichtiger ist es herauszufinden, welche *Hintergrundinformationen* gegeben werden und welche *Gründe* es dafür geben mag, dass das Gedicht noch heute so beliebt ist.

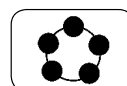
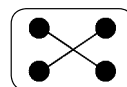
An dieser Stelle ist auch die persönliche Meinung der Schülerinnen und Schüler gefragt und kann im *Unterrichtsgespräch* artikuliert werden.

Aufgabe 2: Hier wird den Schülerinnen und Schülern angeboten, das *Gedicht zu rezitieren*. Da dies, vor allem in der Oberstufe, oft nicht mehr zum Unterrichtsalltag gehört, geht die Lehrkraft feinfühlig vor. Wer möchte, spricht das Gedicht erst einmal zu Hause für sich selbst und kann es später vor der Klasse rezitieren. Erforderlichenfalls lesen sich die betreffenden Schülerinnen oder Schüler zur Vorbereitung die Hinweise zum *Rezitieren* in **Texte und Materialien M 6** durch.



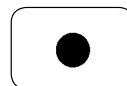
4. Schritt: A Walk through Leaves of Grass

Den literarischen Höhepunkt der Beschäftigung mit Walt Whitman bildet der „**Walk through Leaves of Grass**“ von **Texte und Materialien M 7(1 bis 4)**. Auf diesen Seiten, die nach dem Verfahren des *shared reading* von vier *Schülergruppen* gelesen werden sollen, zitiert der Autor Auszüge aus dem überaus umfangreichen Gedicht und erklärt sie im Anschluss. Die Erklärungen und Erläuterungen sind aufgrund des komplizierten, teilweise philosophierenden Charakters der Zeilen unerlässlich und geben den Schülerinnen und Schülern zugleich eine Grundlage für die Auseinandersetzung mit den darin zum Ausdruck gebrachten, durchaus lebenspraktischen und für die Gesellschaft bedeutsamen Themen im *Unterrichtsgespräch*.

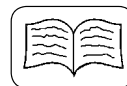


Jede der vier *Arbeits- bzw. Lesegruppen* erhält eine *Aufgabenkarte*, in der fünf zum Teil identische, zum anderen Teil auf den jeweiligen Text zugeschnittene **Assignments** formuliert sind.

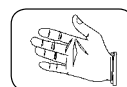
Aufgabe 1: Als erstes sollen *alle Gruppenmitglieder* den gesamten Text ihres Arbeitsblatts *global lesen*, um sich einen Gesamteindruck von dessen Inhalt zu verschaffen.



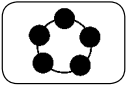
Aufgabe 2: In *Arbeitsteilung* innerhalb der Gruppe sollen nunmehr nach eigenem Ermessen einige Schülerinnen und Schüler den narrativen, erklärenden Text *detailliert lesen*, andere die Gedichtauszüge.



Aufgabe 3: Das *ganze Team* trägt nun überblicksartig zusammen, worum es in ihrem Abschnitt des Gedichts bzw. in den erklärenden Teilen geht und was sie dabei über Walt Whitman als Mensch, Dichter und Politiker gelernt haben. Diese Aufgabe ist eine Art *Mediationsübung*, auch wenn es nicht um die Übertragung von einer Sprache in die andere geht.



Unterrichtsplanung



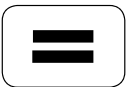
Aufgabe 4: In dieser Aufgabe werden in Bezug auf die jeweiligen Texte *differenzierte Fragen* gestellt, die zum Abschluss im *Unterrichtsgespräch* mit der ganzen Klasse beantwortet werden sollen.

Gruppe 1 – Whitmans Vorstellungen von Demokratie und Freiheit aller Individuen, Männer wie Frauen

Gruppe 2 – Einstellung und Verhalten zu Fremden, das Ich-Selbst und seine Relation zum „Universum“, also der gesamten Menschheit

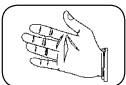
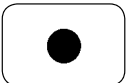
Gruppe 3 – die Kultur zu Whitmans Zeiten, das Individuum und seine Umwelt

Gruppe 4 – des Menschen Verantwortlichkeit, Whitmans Traum vom idealen Amerika



Aufgabe 5: Im abschließenden *Unterrichtsgespräch* berichten die vier Gruppen über ihre *Arbeitsergebnisse* und *diskutieren* mit der ganzen Klasse, inwiefern diese Themen heute noch in Amerika, aber auch zum Beispiel in Deutschland aktuell sind und was sie selbst von Walt Whitman lernen können.

5. Schritt: The Rediscovery of Jack Engles



2016 wurde ein bis dahin für verschollen gehaltener Roman von Walt Whitman entdeckt, nämlich *The Life and Adventures of Jack Engles*. Angesichts der Bedeutung des Autors für die Weltliteratur lieferten sich mehrere Verlage auch in Europa ein Wettrennen, seine deutsche Übersetzung möglichst schnell auf den Markt zu bringen. Zur Ausgabe des Manesse Verlags München/Zürich liefert der Beitrag von Deutschlandfunk Kultur in **Texte und Materialien M 8** eine interessante *Mediationsaufgabe*. Die Zielstellung in **Aufgabe 1** lautet, den Artikel zu lesen und in einer E-Mail an einen Freund oder eine Freundin in den USA auf Englisch zusammenzufassen.

Quellen der Fotos von Texte und Materialien M 1 (1 und 2)

Mark Twain

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain

Ernest Hemingway

<http://dailydish.typepad.com/.a/6a00d83451c45669e201538de8895d970b-popup>

Toni Morrison

<http://www.contramare.net/site/en/princeton-and-the-legacy-of-toni-morrison/>

Truman Capote

<https://literaryfictions.com/fiction-1/miriam-by-truman-capote/>

Walt Whitman

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/walt-whitman>

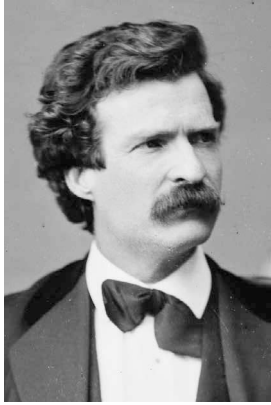
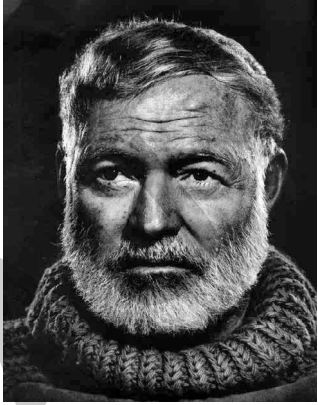


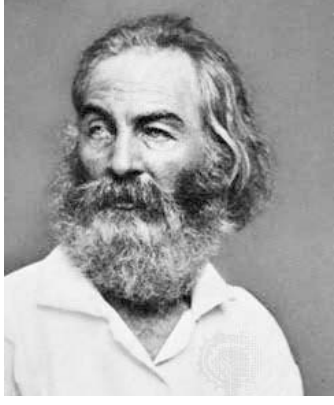

Steven King

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_King

Do you know these American Writers?

Assignments:

1. Do you know these American writers? Write down their names. If possible, add their biographical data, or the title of one of their works.

Walt Whitman – America's World Poet

Assignments:

1. Scan read the text without a dictionary to find the answers to the questions in M 2(2).

- Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, the second son of Walter Whitman, a housebuilder, and Louisa Van Velsor. The family, which consisted of nine children, lived in Brooklyn and Long Island in the 1820s and 1830s. At the age of twelve, Whitman began to learn the printer's trade, and fell in love with the written word. Largely self-taught, he read the works of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and the Bible.
- Whitman worked as a printer in New York City until a devastating fire in the printing district demolished the industry. In 1836, at the age of seventeen, he began his career as a teacher in schools of Long Island. In 1841, he turned to journalism as a full-time career. He founded a weekly newspaper, *Long-Islander*, and later edited a number of Brooklyn and New York papers. In 1848, Whitman left the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* to become editor of the New Orleans *Crescent*. It was in New Orleans that he experienced firsthand the viciousness of slavery in the slave markets of that city. On his return to Brooklyn in the fall of 1848, he founded a "free soil" newspaper, the *Brooklyn Freeman*, and continued to develop the unique style of poetry that later so astonished Ralph Waldo Emerson.
- In 1855, Whitman took out a copyright on the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which consisted of twelve untitled poems and a preface. He published the volume himself, and sent a copy to Emerson in July of 1855. Whitman released a second edition of the book in 1856, containing thirty-three poems, a letter from Emerson praising the first edition, and a long open letter by Whitman in response. During his lifetime, Whitman continued to refine the volume, publishing several more editions of the book.
- At the outbreak of the Civil War, Whitman vowed to live a "purged" and "cleansed" life. He worked as a freelance journalist and visited the wounded at New York City-area hospitals. He then traveled to Washington, D. C. in December 1862 to care for his brother who had been wounded in the war. Overcome by the suffering of the many wounded in Washington, Whitman decided to stay and work in the hospitals and stayed in the city for eleven years. He took a job as a clerk for the Department of the Interior, which ended when the Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan, discovered that Whitman was the author of *Leaves of Grass*, which Harlan found offensive. Harlan fired the poet.
- Whitman struggled to support himself through most of his life. In Washington, he lived on a clerk's salary and modest royalties, and spent any excess money, including gifts from friends, to buy supplies for the patients he nursed. He had also been sending money to his widowed mother and an invalid brother. From time to time writers both in the states and in England sent him "purses" of money so that he could get by.
- In the early 1870s, Whitman settled in Camden, New Jersey, where he had come to visit his dying mother at his brother's house. However, after suffering a stroke, Whitman found it impossible to return to Washington. He stayed with his brother until the 1882 publication of *Leaves of Grass* (James R. Osgood) gave Whitman enough money to buy a home in Camden.
- In the simple two-story clapboard house, Whitman spent his declining years working on additions and revisions to a new edition of the book and preparing his final volume of poems and prose, *Good-Bye, My Fancy* (David McKay, 1891). Along with Emily Dickinson, he is considered one of America's most important poet.

(Source: www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/walt-whitman; slightly abridged)

Walt Whitman – America's World Poet

Assignments:

2. If necessary, read the text a second time with a dictionary. Then answer the following questions on the text. You may write down your answers in complete sentences, or just use key words. As far as possible, do not copy sentences but express what you want to say in your own words.

In which year and to what family was Walt Whitman born?
When did little Walt first come across written word?
At the age of seventeen, Whitman began to work. In which job?
When did he start his career as a journalist?
What was the name of the paper that Whitman started to edit in 1848? Where did he edit it?
When was Whitman's main work "Leaves of Grass" published first?
What did Walt Whitman do during the Civil War? How old was he then?
Why was Whitman fired from the Department of the Interior?
Later in Washington, what did Walt Whitman spend his money on?
Who is considered America's best poet?

3. Find out and explain to the class what Free Soil was.
4. Collect information about the Civil War, and give a short lecture about it to the class.
5. Create a small poster about life and works of Emily Dickinson, and display it in the English classroom.

Walt Whitman – America's World Poet

Assignments:

1. Read this article with the dictionary.
2. Sum up why Walt Whitman is called 'America's world poet'. Quote from the text to prove your answers true.

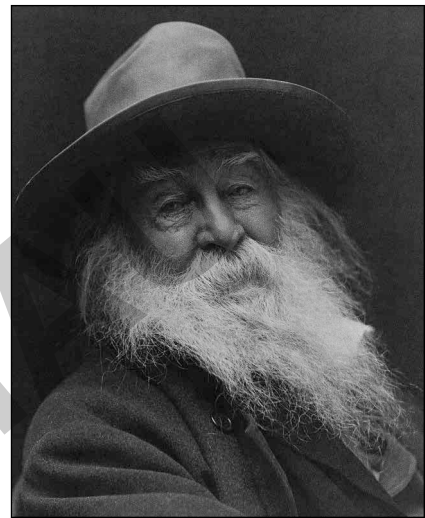
Walt Whitman is America's world poet—a latter-day successor to Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare. In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he celebrated democracy, nature, love, and friendship. This monumental work chanted praises to the body as well as to the soul, and found beauty and reassurance even in death.

Along with Emily Dickinson, Whitman is regarded as one of America's most significant nineteenth century poets. Born on Long Island, Whitman grew up in Brooklyn and received limited formal education. His occupations during his lifetime included printer, schoolteacher, reporter, and editor. Whitman's self-published *Leaves of Grass* was inspired in part by his travels through the American frontier and by his admiration for Ralph Waldo Emerson. This important publication underwent eight subsequent editions during his lifetime as Whitman expanded and revised the poetry and added more to the original collection of twelve poems. Emerson himself declared the first edition was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."

Whitman published his own enthusiastic review of *Leaves of Grass*. Critics and readers alike, however, found both Whitman's style and subject matter unnerving. According to *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*, "Whitman received little public acclaim for his poems during his lifetime for several reasons: this openness regarding sex, his self-presentation as a rough working man, and his stylistic innovations." A poet who "abandoned the regular meter and rhyme patterns" of his contemporaries, Whitman was "influenced by the long cadences and rhetorical strategies of Biblical poetry." Upon publishing *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman was subsequently fired from his job with the Department of the Interior. Despite his mixed critical reception in the U.S., he was favorably received in England, with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne among the British writers who celebrated his work.

During the Civil War, Whitman worked as a clerk in Washington, DC. For three years, he visited soldiers during his spare time, dressing wounds and giving solace to the injured. These experiences led to the poems in his 1865 publication, *Drum-Taps*, which includes, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman's elegy for President Lincoln.

After suffering a serious stroke in 1873, Whitman moved to his brother's home in Camden, New Jersey. While his poetry failed to garner popular attention from his American readership during his lifetime, over 1,000 people came to view his funeral. And as the first writer of a truly American poetry, Whitman's legacy endures. According to *The Longman Anthology of Poetry*, Whitman's "ambition, expansiveness, and embrace of all the high and low features of American life influenced many poets of the twentieth century, including D.H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Allen Ginsberg."



(Source: www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman; photo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman#/media/File:Walt_Whitman_-_George_Collins_Cox.jpg)

Walt Whitman: O Captain! My Captain

- 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:
- 5 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;
- 10 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;
- 15 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;
- 20 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.

Annotations:

2 to weather: *here* to overcome, to withstand; **rack:** *here* strong shaking by high waves, anything hard to cope with; **3 to exult:** to show great happiness; **4 keel:** the long piece of wood or steel along the bottom of a ship; vessel: ship or boat; **10 bugle:** a horn (musical instrument); **11 bouquet:** flowers fastened together as a present; **ribboned wreath:** a circle of flowers decorated with coloured strips of cloth; **14 beneath:** under; **17 pale:** very light in colour, almost white; **19 to anchor:** *here* to make stay in a place dropping a heavy piece of wood or steel onto the ground; **sound:** *here* unharmed; **22 mournful:** very sad; **tread:** step

Assignments:

1. First, listen to the poem at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/o-captain-my-captain/>.
2. Tell your classmate what you have understood.
3. Scan read the text above not caring for unknown words. Check whether you have now understood more.
4. Finally, read the text using the annotations. Discuss with the class what and whom the poem is about.
5. Have you ever heard a person address another person as "O captain! My captain"? What might have been the reason for him or her to use this phrase? Discuss possible answers.

Shared reading 1: Taking a Walk through Leaves of Grass

There was a man, Walt Whitman, who lived in the nineteenth century, in America, who began to define his own person, who began to tell his own secrets, who outlined his own body, and made an outline of his own mind, so other people could see it. He was sort of the prophet of American democracy in the sense that he got to be known as the “good gray poet” when he got to be an old, old man because he was so honest and so truthful and at the same time so enormous-voiced and bombastic. [...]

So he wrote a book called *Leaves of Grass*. And in the final version of that book, the very first inscription was:

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
 Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
 Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
 Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the
 Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,
 The Female equally with the Male I sing.
 Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
 Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
 The modern man I sing.

Well, that's kind of interesting. He starts with the female equally with the male, so he begins in the middle of the nineteenth century by talking about “women's lib”: “The Female equally with the Male I sing.” But he also says he's going to talk about the body, about physiology from top to toe, he's going to sing about the toes and the hair: modern man. This is on the very first page.

Then, further on, he has a little note, “To Foreign Lands”:

I heard that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle the New World,
 And to define America, her athletic Democracy,
 Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what you wanted.

An “athletic Democracy,” what does he mean by that? He means people who are able to get up off their ass and get out and look up at the blue sky in the middle of the night and realize how big the universe is and how little, tiny America is, or how vast our souls are, and how small this state is, or the Capitol building, magnificent and glorious as it is, how it's rendered the size of an ant's forefoot by the immensity of a cloud above it. And so, the soul that sees the cloud above the Capitol or the universe above the cloud is the giant athletic soul, you could almost say. It's democracy, though, that is the key, which for him means, in the long run, the love of comrades, that men will love men, women will love women, men will love women, women will love men, and there will be a spontaneous tenderness between them as the basis of the democracy.

So he goes on, “To the States,” announcing:

To the States or any one of them, or any city of the States, *Resist much, obey little*
 Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,
 Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth, ever afterward resumes its liberty.

That's a warning to America, much needed later on, as when Eisenhower, the president a hundred years later, warned: Watch out for the military-industrial complex which demands unquestioning obedience and slavery to military aggression. Fear, nuclear apocalypse, unquestioning obedience like “Don't ask, maybe they know better than you do.” So this is a warning from Whitman about the difficulties of democracy.

Shared reading 2: Taking a Walk through Leaves of Grass

[...] He wants a democratic love, and he wants an athletic love, he wants a love from men too, and he also wants a love in the imagination. He wants an expansiveness, he wants communication, he wants some kind of vow that everybody will cherish each other sacramentally. So he's going to make the first breakthrough—that's what he's saying. So he's got another little poem following that, "To You":

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you?

Well, I don't know why not, except everybody's too scared to speak to strangers in the street, they might get hit for being thought a fairy or a nut talking in the subway or babbling to himself in the street. But Whitman was willing to talk to anybody, he said. Of course, he was living in a time when there was less fear.

His major work is known as "Song of Myself." "Song of Myself" is a long thing, about thirty-two pages of not such big type; he wrote a lot. And this was a major statement, this was his declaration of his own nature. Now, what is a declaration of nature for a guy? ... in the nineteenth century, everybody was writing in closed verse forms. Some poets went to Germany for their education, like Longfellow, they went to Heidelberg University, and they studied esoteric sociology and epistemology and linguistics and ancient Greek and they thought back on the United States romantically and wrote long poems about Hiawatha and the Indian maidens under the full moon near the Canadian lakes. Whitman actually just stayed in America and slugged it out with the beer carts along the Bowery and wandered up and down and sat afternoons in Pfaff's. Pfaff's was a bar he used to go to, a Bohemian hangout, a downstairs beer hall, sort of like a German *bierstube*. Bohemian friends used to meet there, probably like a gay gang, plus a newspaper gang, plus a theatrical gang, and the opera singers, and some of the dancers, a Broadway crowd sort of, but further down Broadway, near Bleecker. And that was his hangout.

He was very naïve at first. A young guy, he started out writing bad poetry, temperance novels, and newspaper articles, and editing the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Then something happened to him in his thirties, about thirty-four—well, you know, crucifixion time—maybe he realized he was going to die someday or that America was weird, or that he was weird, or maybe some kind of breakthrough of personal affection, maybe some kind of gay lib thing. [...]

Whitman was probably the first writer in America who was not ashamed of the fact that his thoughts were as big as the universe, or that they were equal to the universe, or that they fitted the universe. He wasn't ashamed of his mind or his body. So he wrote "Song of Myself," and it began tipping off where he was coming from and where he was going, saying that you, too, needn't be ashamed of your thoughts:

I celebrate myself and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.
Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

Taking a Walk through Leaves of Grass**Group 1**

1. All group members: Skim read the text so that you know what it is all about.
2. Share the job: some read the narrative text, others read the extracts from Leaves of Grass.
3. As a team, sum up what you have learned from the text about Walt Whitman, his way of life, character and political views.
4. What does the poet think and write about ...
 - a. his image of democracy?
 - b. the freedom of all individuals, be they male or female?
5. Tell your classmates about your findings, and discuss with them whether these topics are still essential in America today, and what you can learn from Whitman.

Group 2

1. All group members: Skim read the text so that you know what it is all about.
2. Share the job: some read the narrative text, others read the extracts from Leaves of Grass.
3. As a team, sum up what you have learned from the text about Walt Whitman, his way of life, character and political views.
4. What does the poet think and write about ...
 - a. stranger and our attitude to them?
 - b. our ego, our self and its relation to the universe?
5. Tell your classmates about your findings, and discuss with them whether these topics are still essential in America today, and what you can learn from Whitman.

Group 3

1. All group members: Skim read the text so that you know what it is all about.
2. Share the job: some read the narrative text, others read the extracts from Leaves of Grass.
3. As a team, sum up what you have learned from the text about Walt Whitman, his way of life, character and political views.
4. What does the poet think and write about ...
 - a. the sophisticated culture of his time?
 - b. the individual and his environment?
5. Tell your classmates about your findings, and discuss with them whether these topics are still essential in America today, and what you can learn from Whitman.

Group 4

1. All group members: Skim read the text so that you know what it is all about.
2. Share the job: some read the narrative text, others read the extracts from Leaves of Grass.
3. As a team, sum up what you have learned from the text about Walt Whitman, his way of life, character and political views.
4. What does the poet think and write about ...
 - a. man's responsibility here and now?
 - b. his dreams of an ideal America?
5. Tell your classmates about your findings, and discuss with them whether these topics are still essential in America today, and what you can learn from Whitman.