
Walt Whitman and Music: Melody and Metaphor

Middle (6th - 8th grade)

Time required: 20-25 minutes

Specific recommendation: 6th-8th grade Language Arts

Goals/Objectives:

- Define “metaphor” and “analogy”
- Identify metaphors in Walt Whitman’s “As I Watch’d the Plowman Plowing”
- Identify how the music of “As I Watch’d the Plowman Plowing” supports the text

Common Core Standards:

- L. 6.5, 7.5, 8.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings

Materials:

Song of America Links

Basic Musical Elements handout: <https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>

Walt Whitman printable timeline: <https://songofamerica.net/downloads/walt-whitman-timeline/>

Song of America online timeline: <http://songofamerica.net/timeline/> (Emergence of Modern U.S.)

Song of America Walt Whitman radio program:

<https://songofamerica.net/program/song-of-walt-whitman/>

Song of America “As I Watch’d the Ploughman Ploughing” song page:

<http://songofamerica.net/song/as-i-watchd-the-ploughman-ploughing>

Song of America Walt Whitman page: <http://songofamerica.net/writer/whitman-walt>

Instruction:

- The teacher introduces the poet Walt Whitman as well as Whitman’s time period using timelines
<https://songofamerica.net/downloads/walt-whitman-timeline/>
<http://songofamerica.net/timeline/> (Emergence of Modern United States)
- The teacher introduces farm culture in mid-1800s America, and farm vocabulary:
 - *sowing*: planting the seeds
 - *harvest*: gathering the crops
 - *plowing*: turning up the earth for planting
 - *tilling*: preparing the earth for planting
- Students listen to “As I Watch’d the Plowman Plowing” with poetry by Walt Whitman and music by Philip Dalmas [<https://songofamerica.net/program/song-of-walt-whitman/> at 25:18, or 23:57

with Thomas Hampson introduction]. Students follow the text while listening [<http://songofamerica.net/song/as-i-watchd-the-ploughman-ploughing>].

- The teacher begins a discussion by asking, “What is the mood of the song? What musical elements create this mood? How does the music reflect the meaning of Whitman’s poem?”
 - Refer to the *Song of America* Basic Musical Elements handout for an easy guide to talking about music:
<https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>
- Students then answer questions with a partner: “How is life similar to tilling? How is death similar to harvesting?” The students share their responses with the class.