**Walt Whitman: The American Civil War and English Language Arts**

**Overview:** This lesson traces Walt Whitman’s life and poems, with specific focus on his life and works during The Civil War. Students will research Walt Whitman’s life, creating a timeline of his life’s events and published works. Where’s the geography?

**Connection to National Geography Standards:**
- Standard 2: How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context
- Standard 6: How culture and experience influence people’s perceptions of places and regions

**Connection to Oregon Geography Content Standards:**
- Create and use maps, technology, imagery and other geographical representations to extrapolate and interpret geographic data.

**Connections to Common Core:**
- By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
- Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s —Letter from Birmingham Jail), including how they address related themes and concepts.

**Objectives:** In completing this exercise, students should be able to:

- Understand the impact the Civil War had on Walt Whitman’s life and works
- Create a detailed timeline of Walt Whitman’s life and works
- Comprehend and analyze four of Walt Whitman’s poems

**Grade Levels:** 9-12  
**Time:** Three-Four 60 minute periods

**Materials:**
- 16x20 white construction paper
- A blank map of the United States
- Copies of the following Walt Whitman poems
  - “Beat! Beat! Drums!”
  - “Come Up From the Fields Father”
  - “O Captain! My Captain!”
  - “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”
• Scissors and glue for various images students choose
• Access to computers and internet

**Background:** This activity works well as an introduction to poetry, or researching an author’s profile, or literacy in the Civil War. This lesson introduces key concepts such as mapping dates and places, researching an author’s life, and reading primary sources.

**Procedures:**

1. Divide the class into 4 groups by counting them off 1-4. Each group will be given a different Walt Whitman poem from the list mentioned above in the materials section. One student should read the poem aloud to the group, while the other members follow along, taking notes on the poem, and about what they think the poem means. Picking out any themes, imagery or words that gave them the clues as to why they came to the conclusion that their group did. Give students 20 minutes to complete this task.

2. When time is up, have the group decide who the speaker of their group will be. That student will come to the front of the class, read the poem aloud to the class and give the class a brief description on what they think the poem means. Each group will present.

3. Once all groups have presented, as a class, brainstorm what can be inferred about any of these poems. Is there a general theme? What time period may these poems have been written? This activity should get students thinking about what all these poems may have in common. The obvious will be that they are by the same author but push for the students to go deeper!

4. Now that the students are thinking about the overall theme of these poems. Take your class to the computer lab. Once in the lab, students will be researching the life of Walt Whitman. They need to research Whitman, with this task in mind: they will be creating a timeline of his life on a 16x20 construction paper. There must be at least 20 events, including: his life and death, and his published works. Of those 20 events, students will need to print pictures of at least 10 events to show the life event visually on their timeline. Ultimately, the end product should show a minimum of 20 events, 10 pictures, all neatly organized on a 16x20 sheet of construction paper. This task should take one 60 minute period. Some helpful websites to direct students towards may be:

5. During the next class period, give students time to construct their timelines. Times will vary depending on student’s productivity.
6. At this time, students may present their timelines. Hang the timelines around the room and allow the students to do a gallery walk. Taking notes on events that they did not put on their personal timeline. I would challenge the class to visit all timelines but maybe require them to at least read and take notes on 5-8 for time purposes.

7. Now knowing facts about Walt Whitman and the timeline of his life in regards to the Civil War, revisit the four poems from the beginning of the lesson. Reread the poems in the following order, analyzing the meaning of each poem in succession to the events of the Civil War:
   - “Beat! Beat! Drums!”
   - “Come Up From the Fields Father”
   - “O Captain! My Captain!”
   - “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

**Assessment:** Have the students write a short essay on this prompt, “What can you infer about the impact of the war on the poet? Your response must include examples from at least one of Walt Whitman’s poems to prove your point.”

**Extensions and/or Adaptations:**

1. An alternate or additional activity, depending on time, could be to handout a blank map of the United States and have the students find the significant event of Walt Whitman’s life by giving them the state/city the event took place in but having them map and explain what the event was that took place in that state/city.
   - i. New York
   - ii. New Orleans
   - iii. Boston
   - iv. Virginia
   - v. Washington D.C.
   - vi. Philadelphia

**Works Cited**

1. [http://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/historic/whitman/docs/civil.pdf](http://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/historic/whitman/docs/civil.pdf)