



Life, Death, Dirt and Walt Whitman

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INTRODUCTION

This lesson includes an analysis of Walt Whitman's poem "This Compost" from his famous collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*. Through a literary lens, students will discuss and understand the rebirth of organic materials through composting.

LESSON OVERVIEW

Grade Level & Subject: Grades 9-12: Language Arts and/or English

Length: One 45 min. class period

Objectives:

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Analyze the poem "This Compost" through a literary lens
- Relate the poem "This Compost" to the rebirth of organic material
- Compare facts about the decomposition and renewal process of compost to language use and word choice in the poem "This Compost"
- Consider why composting is a contradictory process that is a natural part of the earth's cycle of life
- Explain how composting is the rebirth of organic material

National Standards Addressed:

This lesson addresses the following National Education Standards¹

- **Content Standard:** [NL-ENG.K-12.1: READING FOR PERSPECTIVE](#)
Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- **Content Standard:** [NL-ENG.K-12.2 UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE](#)

¹ <http://www.education-world.com/standards/>

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

- **Content Standard:** [NL-ENG.K-12.6: APPLYING KNOWLEDGE](#)

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

- **Content Standard:** [NL-ENG.K-12.11: PARTICIPATING IN SOCIETY](#)

Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

Materials Needed:

- Reproducible #1 – “**This Compost**”
- Reproducible #2- **Whitman Writing Reflection Questions**

Assessment: Students will be assessed through the following activities:

- Contribution of ideas to class discussion
- Completing Reproducible #2- **Whitman Writing Reflection Questions** - answering reflection questions about the poem
- Completion of 3-5 page essay relating to the poem

LESSON BACKGROUND

Relevant Vocabulary:

- **Fetor**- a strong, foul smell
- **Sumptuous**-splendid and expensive looking
- **Visage**- (French) a person’s face
- **Amorous**- showing, feeling or relating to love or affection
- **Unwitting**- unintentional

Information:

Usually we dump leftover food in with the rest of our garbage and it goes off to the landfills. Landfills cause soil, air and water pollution, affect local wildlife and their habitats, and release harmful methane gases into the atmosphere. Unlike other kinds of garbage, organic materials (including vegetables, fruits and grains) are not doomed to such a wasteful fate—they can be composted and reused in the soil to fertilize other plants. Of course eliminating unnecessary food waste is the best option, but for any food that is not eaten, composting is the best way to use this “waste.”

Resources:

- *Composting* Action Plan, Earth Day Network, 2008.

LESSON STEPS

Warm-up: *Discussing the Theme*

1. Before passing out the poem, begin by compiling a list of words from the students that they associate with the word “compost.” Some words that might come to mind include: decay, smelly, life, death, earth, rebirth, dirt, food, garbage, recycling, worm, biodegradable, pile. Leave this list up on the board for later reference.

Activity One: *Introduce Poem*

1. *Background Information: Walt Whitman, (1819-1892)*

In order to gain perspective, your students should have a background of knowledge about Walt Whitman. If possible, provide a few of his poems for the students to read on their own before the lesson begins.

Walt Whitman was born in Long Island, New York and is known as one of America’s greatest poets. Although his poems are usually not rhymed or metered, they are full of allusions to song. His most famous poem is called “Song of Myself” (from his most famous collection, *Leaves of Grass*) and is full of lyrical praises of humanity. Whitman wrote poetry full of love for America, its land, its democracy and government and the diversity of its peoples. His poetry was often very sensual, including paeans of praise to the body, in all its forms (Whitman was rumored to have had a homosexual relationship in 1959). One of his most famous poems is *Oh Captain, My Captain*, a tribute to Abraham Lincoln. He included themes that reflected his love for the natural world (especially American landscapes) that he developed early in his childhood.

2. Hand out **Reproducible #1: “This Compost”** to students. Have them read through it once silently to themselves all the way through without stopping. Have them read it a second time, highlighting and marking the poem with literary perspectives they know.
3. Solicit a student volunteer(s) to read the poem out loud to the class.

Activity Two: *Reflection and Discussion*

1. Talk to your students briefly about some of the key ideas and themes from the poem (but don’t give away too much!).
2. Pass out **Reproducible #2: Whitman Writing Reflection Questions**. Allow students enough time to individually complete short reflection questions.
3. Once all students have completely answered the questions, facilitate a discussion with the class, allowing students a chance to share their thoughts and ideas about the poem.

Wrap Up: *Discussion*

1. Discuss with students what they have learned about composting through Whitman's poem and how literature can be used as a medium for encouraging activism.
2. Ask students if they would consider starting their own compost pile, either at school or home, and encourage them to do more research on the topic and share what they learn with family and friends.

Extension: *Writing and Composting*

1. A good essay topic might be to write a 3-5 page essay demonstrating how Whitman's use of the themes of death and life encompass the decay and rebirth that exist within a compost pile. As part of the assignment, students should research more about composting. They should compare facts about the decomposition and renewal process of compost, to language use and word choice in "This Compost."
2. Start composting! After researching various options (including vermicomposting, compost bins, compost turners, compost piles, etc.) and find the one that will work best for you and your students. Consider location (indoor vs. outdoor), aeration, maintenance, what types of materials you will be composting, and what you will do with the composted matter.

CONCLUSION

At the completion of this lesson, students will have a better understanding of this poem and of composting. They will have a greater understanding of Walt Whitman and his poetry. The class will also see growth in their vocabulary and comprehension of composting.

This Compost

Walt Whitman (*Leaves of Grass*, 1891)

1

Something startles me where I thought I was safest,
I withdraw from the still woods I loved,
I will not go now on the pastures to walk,
I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea,
I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me.

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?
How can you be alive you growths of spring?
How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain?
Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within you?
Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?

Where have you disposed of their carcasses?
Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations?
Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat?
I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv'd,
I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through
the sod and turn it up underneath,
I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat.

2

Behold this compost! behold it well!
Perhaps every mite has once form'd part of a sick person--yet behold!
The grass of spring covers the prairies,
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,
The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,
The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on
their nests,
The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,
The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow, the
colt from the mare,
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in
the dooryards,
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata
of sour dead.



<http://www.nyu.edu/public.affairs/images/photos/uploads/whitman.jpg>

What chemistry!
That the winds are really not infectious,
That this is no cheat, this transparent green-wash of the sea which
is so amorous after me,
That it is safe to allow it to lick my naked body all over with its tongues,
That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited
themselves in it,
That all is clean forever and forever,
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,
That blackberries are so flavorful and juicy,
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that
melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me,
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once
catching disease.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless
successions of diseas'd corpses,
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings
from them at last.



http://www.capefearcompost.com/images/compost_hands_zaxs.jpg

Whitman Writing

1. In the last stanza Whitman claims that earth “grows such sweet things out of such corruptions.” What are some of the “sweet things” he mentions? What does he mean by “corruptions”?

2. In the 5th stanza, Whitman says “this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me.” Refer to the definition of “amorous.” Why does he use this word choice? How is this typical of Whitman’s poetry? How does it fit in with the themes of this poem?

3. Consider these definitions. How are both “life and death” part of the definition of “compost”? How are both concepts present in the poem?
 - a. Compost: decayed organic material used as a plant fertilizer
 - b. Decay: the process of declining in quality, power or vigor; the state of rotting or decomposition
 - c. Fertilizer: a chemical or natural substance added to soil or land to increase its fertility

4. Look back at the list of words we compiled about compost. How do these words compare with the ones in the poem? Has Whitman changed your understanding of compost? If so, how?

5. Does this poem imply that composting is important? Why do you think composting important? What do you know about composting? Have you ever composted your own food?
