When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

POEM TEXT

1

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

2

O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

3

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

4

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,
With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,
With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey,
With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,
Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

7

(Nor for you, for one alone,

Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

8

O western orb sailing the heaven,
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd,
As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,)
As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,)
As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,
As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night,
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,
Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

9

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.

10

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds blown from east and west,
Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there on the prairies meeting,
These and with these and the breath of my chant,
I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

11

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air,
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific,
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there,
With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows,
And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,
And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning.

12

Lo, body and soul—this land,
My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships,
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio's shores and flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.

Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,
The gentle soft-born measureless light,
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

13

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant

from the bushes,
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid and free and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!
You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

14

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the farmers preparing their crops,
In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests,
In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,)
Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children and women,
The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and minutia of daily usages,
And the streets how their throbbings throbb'd, and the cities pent—lo, then and there,
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,
Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,
The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,
And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,
Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,
As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,
And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.

Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd

death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

15

To the tally of my soul,
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night.

Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,
And I with my comrades there in the night.

While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,
As to long panoramas of visions.

And I saw askant the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

16

Passing the visions, passing the night,
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,
Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,
Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,
As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,
Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee,
O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night,
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,
With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the dead I loved so well,
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his dear sake,
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

SUMMARY

1

The last time the lilacs bloomed in the front yard, and the powerful western star set too early, I grieved. And I will grieve again each time spring returns.

Spring, you always return, and you will always bring me these three things: the lilac that blooms each year, the falling star, and thoughts and memories of the man I love.

2

Oh, powerful western star that fell out of the sky! Oh, shadows of the night—Oh, temperamental, weeping night! Oh, bright star that vanished from the sky—Oh, the darkness that covers

up this star! Oh, brutal hands that hold me back from being able to do anything—Oh, my helpless soul! Oh, the cruel haze that surrounds everything and won't let my soul go.

3

In the front yard of an old farmhouse, near the white fence, a lilac bush stands. It grows tall and its leaves are shaped like hearts made of a deep green color. It has many cone-shaped blossoms rising delicately into the air. The flowers have a strong scent that I love. Every leaf of this lilac bush is miraculous—and from this lilac bush in the front yard, with its ornately colored flowers and its deep green leaves shaped like hearts, I break off a small branch and its flower.

4

In the quiet, sheltered area of a swamp, a shy bird perches out of sight and sings a song.

The bird is alone like a deeply religious person who has withdrawn from society to live only by himself, constantly avoiding people. Alone, he sings a song.

This song sounds like it comes from a wounded throat—it is a song in which death finds a kind of release (for I know, dear bird, that if you couldn't sing you would die).

5

Across the landscape of spring, through the country, through cities, through small streets and old forests (where new violets have recently emerged from the ground to look upon the gray remains of winter), through the fields of grass growing on either side of the streets, past these endless fields, past the wheat that grows like yellow spears and the grains that have sprouted from their husks, past the white and pink apple blossoms in the orchards—through all of this, a dead body is carried to its grave, a coffin traveling night and day.

6

This coffin travels through paths and streets, through day and night as a huge cloud casts a shadow on the land. It travels with cermonious American flags tucked into themselves while the cities remain covered in black to express mourning. The states it passes through are dressed for grief like women standing in black veils. The coffin travels with long, winding lines of mourners and flaming torches in the night. It travels by the light of all of those innumerable torches, the crowd of mourners watching like a quiet ocean of faces and covered heads. Mourners wait at train stations to greet the coffin as it arrives, their faces gloomy as they look at it. It travels with songs of mourning playing through the night, a thousand voices singing powerfully and somberly. It travels with all of the grieving voices of the sorrowful songs—songs that pour like water over the coffin and into half-lit churches that shake with the mighty sound of trembling pipe organs. You travel through all of this with the ongoing clang of ringing bells. Here, coffin that slowly passes me, I give you my small branch from the lilac bush.

7

(And it's not just for you that I bring this sprig of lilac. I offer flowers and green branches to *all* coffins. I would sing a song as new and crisp as morning air for you, death, since you are so healthy and holy.

There are bunches of roses everywhere; death, I would cover you completely with these roses and with recently blossomed lilies, but most of all with lilac, which is the first flower to bloom in spring. I break off multiple branches from the lilac bushes, and with my arms full of these flowers I come to you, pouring them out for you and for all of the coffins that you, death, have created.)

8

Oh, star in the West moving through the sky, now I understand what you must have meant a month ago, when I walked quietly through the clear dark night and saw that you wanted to tell me something. You seemed to bend toward me from the sky each night, and you dropped from the sky almost to be by my side (while all the other stars watched). We walked together through the somber night because for some reason I couldn't sleep. As the night got later, I saw you on the western horizon and thought you looked like you were full of sorrow. I stood there on the high ground while a light wind blew through the cool, clear night, and I watched the place you had crossed in the sky; I felt lost in the black depths of the night. When you, sad star, disappeared and dropped into the night, my soul sank into trouble and unease.

9

Bird singing in the swamp, keep singing. Oh, you shy, gentle singer, I hear the notes of your song. I hear you and am coming to you. I understand you, but I'm staying here a moment longer because this beautiful star has held me back; it is the star of my departing friend that keeps me from coming.

10

Oh, how will I sing my own song for the one who has died, the one I loved? How will I prepare and decorate my song for the huge, sweet soul that has left? And what kind of scent will I bring to the grave of the one who died, the person I love?

Winds blow off the sea from the east and west, blowing from the eastern ocean and the western ocean and meeting in prairies in the middle of the country. Here, in the middle of the country, I will bring to his grave the scent of these ocean winds and the breath of my own song.

11

Oh, what will I hang up on the walls of his burial chamber? And what pictures can I put up on these walls to decorate his tomb?

I'll bring pictures of the new growth in springtime and pictures of farms and houses bathed in an April sunset, clear gray smoke rising from the houses. These pictures will show the gold color pouring from the beautiful, lazy, dropping sun, which is burning

and makes the air itself grow larger. These pictures will show the new sweet grass that we walk on and the new spring leaves of the plentiful trees. In the background, the pictures will show the shining surface of a running river, touched in places by the wind. The pictures will show the many hills on the banks of the river—hills that create silhouettes against the sky and other kinds of shadows. The pictures will also show the nearby city, which is densely populated, and the brick stacks of chimneys. The pictures will show the life in these cities, showing factories and workshops and men coming home from work.

12

Look at this land, which has a body and a soul: Manhattan, where I'm from, with the tall points of its buildings, and the shining, quick-moving ocean tides and ships. Look at the diverse and plentiful land, the southern and northern United States in the sunlight, the shores of the Ohio River and the glistening Missouri River. And look at the expansive prairies which are covered with grass and corn.

Look at the admirable, brilliant sun, which is peaceful and proud. Look at the morning with its different shades of purple in the sky and its barely detectable breezes. Look at the tender and infinite light. Look at how the sun seems like a miracle when it rises, its light covering and washing over everything. Look at the satisfied middle of the day and the delightful feeling of the evening's approach. Look at the long-awaited night and its stars, which shine over all of my cities, blanketing both the people and the land.

13

Keep singing, you grayish-brown bird. Sing from the wetlands and all the hidden places. Pour out your song from the undergrowth. Sing this expansive song in the evening by letting it cry out from the cedar and pine trees.

Keep singing, beloved brother, trill your high song. Your song is loud and human. Keep singing it with your deeply sad voice.

Oh, your song is flowing and gentle! Oh, your song is uninhibited and frees my soul—Oh, amazing singer! I only hear you, but the star holds me back (though soon he, the star, will leave). Still, the powerful scent of the lilac holds me back.

14

I sat in the daytime and looked around. It was the end of the day, so the sunset bathed the fields bursting with spring, lighting the farmers as they planted their crops. I saw the huge landscape of my country with its lakes and woods. There was a sacred beauty in the air after the disturbance of stormy weather. I sat beneath the curved sky, where a bird flew past in the afternoon, and I heard the sound of children and women talking. There were also the shifting ocean tides, and I could see boats sailing on the water. I felt the rich feeling of summer getting closer, and farmers busy working in the fields, and the countless distinct houses, all of them going on in their own way—in each house there were meals and small daily activities. I saw the pulsing movement in the streets and the pent-up cities. While I sat looking out like this, I saw a cloud that covered everything. This cloud appeared like a long black path, and I suddenly felt like I knew death—the thought of it felt familiar and holy.

Then it was as if death itself walked beside me while my own *thoughts* about death walked on the other side. I walked in the middle of them as though walking with friends and holding their hands. But then I escaped into the safety of the silent night. I went to the banks of the swamp and traveled along its dim path. I escaped amongst the somber cedar trees and the pines, which stood so still they seemed like ghosts.

And the singing bird who is so shy to everyone else welcomed me there. This grayish-brown bird welcomed us three friends: me, the knowledge of death itself, and my own thoughts about death. And the bird sang a song of death that included a verse for the one I love who died.

This bird's song came out of the hidden, sheltered depths of the swamp, emerging from the scent of the cedar trees and the ghost-like pine trees.

The song cast a kind of spell over me as I stood there with my friends—the knowledge of death and the thought of death—as though I was holding their hands in the night. My soul's voice sang the same song as the bird:

Come to us, beautiful and calming death. Ripple around the world, peacefully reaching everyone at any time of day or night; gentle death, you'll come to everyone sooner or later.

Let us praise the infinite universe for the gifts of life and happiness; let us praise the universe for all its interesting objects and strange pieces of knowledge. Let us praise it for the existence of sweet love—but above all, let us praise and praise and praise the cool embrace of death, which will surely fold us in its arms.

Death, you are like a shadowy mother who always approaches with quiet footsteps. Has nobody sung a song to welcome you? If not, then I sing it for you. I praise you above everything else. I bring you a song, saying that when you inevitably approach, you should approach without hesitation.

Come closer, powerful death, and deliver us from life. When you finally take people away, I will sing joyfully for them. I will sing for those who have disappeared into your ocean of love; I will sing for those who have been bathed in your heavenly flood.

I offer you happy songs of praise. I think there should be dances for you, along with decorations and festivals. The sights of open land and the expansive sky are appropriate gifts for you. Life itself, large fields, and the enormous, thoughtful night are also appropriate gifts for you.

The night is silent beneath the stars. The beach and the sound of the waves are like the raspy whisper of a voice I've heard many times.

My soul turns to face you, oh infinite and well-hidden death, and my body thankfully burrows closer to you.

I send a song over the treetops to you. It travels over the waves, over the many fields, and over vast prairies. It travels over all the densely populated cities and the crowded waterfronts and streets. Over all of this I send this joyous song to you, death.

15

Keeping up with the song of my own soul, the grayish-brown bird kept singing its own song loudly and strongly. It sang with clean, intentional notes spreading out and filling the entire night.

The song was loud in the dark pine trees and the cedars. It rang clearly through the fresh dampness of the swamp, cutting through the swamp's scent. I stood there with my friends—the knowledge of death and the thought of death—in the night.

My vision was no longer limited to what my eyes could see—instead, I saw huge, sweeping visions.

I caught a glimpse of armies at war. As though I was having a dream without sound, I saw hundreds of flags raised in the battle—flags that were carried through smoky battlefields and sliced by sharp projectiles. The flags were carried back and forth through the smoke until they were ripped and bloody. Finally, only a few shreds of the flags remained on the flagpoles and everything was silent. The flagpoles themselves had broken to pieces.

I saw the bodies of people who died in battle, huge numbers of them. I saw the white bones of young men who had died. I saw the remains of all of the soldiers who had been killed in the war. But I realized that they weren't the way I thought they were; they had finally come to a peaceful rest, and they didn't suffer anymore. But those who were still alive continued to suffer, as did the mothers of the deceased. And the wives and children and bewildered friends of the dead suffered. What remained of the armies suffered, too.

16

Moving through these visions of war in the night, I let go of my friends' hands. I pass through the reclusive bird's song and the song of my own soul—a triumphant song in which death finds a kind of release. But this song is always changing. It is a low cry, but it also has a clear melody that rises and falls and pours into the night. The song falls away in sadness like a warning of some kind, but then bursts out in happiness. It spreads over the entire earth and fills the sky like the powerful song I heard coming from the swamp at the night. I leave you, lilac bush with leaves shaped like hearts. I leave you there in the front yard; I leave you there in bloom, only to return in the spring.

I stop singing my song for you. I stop looking for you in the West. I stop facing the west. I stop gathering you close, oh my bright friend whose face is silver in the night.

But everyone will hold onto the song that emerged in the night. Everyone will remember the amazing song of the grayish-brown bird, which inspired my own soul to sing along with the bright star that went down with its face full of sorrow. And my soul sang along as death held my hand on either side and we approached the singing bird—the knowledge of death and the thought of death were my comrades, and I stood between them, and this memory will sustain my love of the man who died and whom I loved so much. He was the smartest and kindest person in my life. This is for him: the lilac and the star and the bird have united with the song of my soul, surrounded by the scent of the pine trees and the dark cedars.

THEMES

AMERICAN RESILIENCE

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" mourns the death of President Abraham Lincoln, who was assassinated in 1865. As the speaker considers what will happen to the United States in the face of such a profound and violent tragedy, he ends up affirming the beauty and resilience of the American spirit. The poem suggests that the nation will persevere and continue to grow and flourish even after Lincoln's death—and perhaps even more powerfully because of this experience of loss.

Throughout the poem, the rich natural landscapes of the United States is meant to be symbolic of the beauty and resilience of the American people themselves. The speaker mentions "grass in the fields," prairies with corn, and the "pale green leaves" of forests—all things that call attention to the country's breadth and diversity. The speaker also mentions ocean winds that blow into the center of the country from both the eastern and western coasts. This highlights the expansiveness of the country, and the diversity of all these different landscapes speaks to the unifying strength of the American spirit—something that unites the American people from coast to coast in a shared sense of perseverance.

The speaker also depicts American industry, including "all the scenes of life and the workshops" as well as "workmen" going home at the end of the day. These images convey the hard work and dedication of the American people, who have become an important part of the country's beautiful natural landscapes.

Building on this natural imagery, the speaker implies that just as spring follows winter, so too will American ideals reemerge after Lincoln's death. In other words, this national tragedy—a literal death that has metaphorically plunged the country into a winter of grief and despair—won't prevent the nation from flourishing again.

To illustrate this idea, the speaker says he will mourn the anniversary of Lincoln's death each spring, yet also remarks that this spring is "ever-returning." The imagery of new leaves,

blooming flowers, and violets that "peep[] from the ground" suggests that life is strong enough to withstand the winter and grow again. Similarly, the resilience of the American people will allow them to survive this period of loss and flourish in the future.

The poem also repeatedly returns to the figure of a lone bird who comes out of a swamp to sing and reassure the speaker. This small bird has managed to withstand the winter cold thanks to its resilient spirit. Just as this bird reemerges to sing after a long winter, so too, the poem implies, will the American people flourish again after this time of grief.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 12-17
- Lines 18-19
- Lines 26-32
- Lines 66-67
- Lines 74-77
- Lines 81-88
- Lines 89-98
- Lines 99-103
- Lines 109-116
- Lines 126-131
- Lines 163-165
- Lines 185-194

DEATH AS A NATURAL PART OF LIFE

In mourning the death of Abraham Lincoln, the poem meditates on mortality more broadly. It spotlights and criticizes the human capacity for destruction, but it also suggests that death is a natural, crucial, and even beautiful part of life.

The poem is filled with images of death, some of which initially seem frightening and awful. The speaker emphasizes the grief and confusion he feels in the wake of Lincoln's assassination—a death that was far from natural—and also frequently alludes to (though never directly mentions) the American Civil War, evoking images of "battle corpses" and "the white skeletons of young men." Through all of this imagery, the speaker laments human beings' ability to do so much harm to one another.

At the same time, the speaker suggests that those who have died are now at peace. Death is a natural part of life, the poem implies, and not necessarily something to be feared. To that end, the soldiers who died in war are "fully at rest" and no longer suffer. Those who are still alive suffer *for* them, but those soldiers themselves are now free from humanity's violence.

The bird that sings a "carol of death" is yet another indication that death is natural. In this song, the bird praises "lovely and soothing death," which offers relief from suffering and is intricately connected with all aspects of nature, including the "tree-tops," "waves," and "prairies." This makes death seem harmonious and peaceful.

The speaker also envisions the "knowledge of death" walking next to him like a friend, suggesting that the speaker and death are equals or "companions." In this image, death is not something frightening, but something to be acknowledged and embraced as part of human life.

The poem even implies that death can be redemptive; in other words, positive changes can emerge from otherwise tragic deaths. The poem subtly links Lincoln's assassination to the crucifixion of Christ. Lincoln died on Good Friday, and the poem connects Lincoln's death to springtime and to a star that has "fallen" out of heaven. This imagery alludes to Christ's crucifixion, which according to the biblical narrative also occurred in the spring. The poem thus suggests that Lincoln is a kind of Christlike figure whose martyrdom will offer redemption to the United States.

The poem reaffirms this with its imagery and descriptions. For instance, the speaker describes how Lincoln's funeral train passes through the country, and, in the train's wake, "every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields [is] uprisen." Here, the speaker describes wheat growing out of the ground and out of its husks; yet he also suggests that the wheat is emerging from its "shroud," which is another name for funeral cloth. This suggests that Lincoln's death has enabled a kind of life *beyond* death—a resurrection in the surrounding landscape and the country as a whole.

While the poem mourns Lincoln's death, then, the speaker also suggests that death is not something to be feared. Instead, the poem depicts death as a crucial part of the natural world and the cycle of life, implying that even the most terrible deaths can lead to new possibilities.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 7-11
- Lines 23-24
- Line 29
- Lines 31-32
- Line 33
- Lines 34-40
- Lines 41-42
- Lines 46-54
- Lines 66-70
- Lines 71-73
- Lines 79-80
- Lines 117-119
- Lines 120-128
- Lines 132-162
- Lines 171-184

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GRIEF

The poem mourns a very public national loss: the death of President Abraham Lincoln. But the speaker also expresses his grief and mourning in very *personal* ways. The poem implies that people did not need to personally know Lincoln to feel his death as a gutting, intimate loss—a loss no less painful for being experienced by the entire nation at once. There is no collective or public experience of grief, the poem ultimately suggests, without individual, personal experiences of that grief as well.

The speaker acknowledges the public nature of this loss; Lincoln's death, the poem makes clear, is a national tragedy. The poem refers to Lincoln's funeral train, for example, which traveled from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois (over seven states). The train made a number of public stops so that people throughout the country could pay their respects. The speaker evokes this journey, describing the "[c]offin that passes through lanes and streets" and "the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads." The poem emphasizes just how extensive this shared grief is, "[w]ith processions long and winding" and "[w]ith the countless torches lit" to memorialize Lincoln. The repetition of "with" in this list spotlights the fact that people have come together to share their grief.

At the same time, the way the speaker expresses his *own* grief feels intensely private and personal. The poem never names Lincoln specifically; rather, the speaker refers to Lincoln throughout as "him I love." This term sounds almost as though the poem is a love poem or poem honoring a close friend. The speaker also describes leaving the "infinite separate houses" of other people to walk alone into the woods and contemplate death—an act of private mourning amidst the country's mourning as a whole.

The speaker thus seems somehow separated from the masses despite their shared pain—something the poem suggests that every grieving citizen may experience. Those processions of mourners may come together in their sadness, yet the poem implies that *each* of these people must also cope with their own, private grief. These personal experiences are small parts of a larger sorrow, yet no less valid for their intimacy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Before Line 1
- Lines 1-6
- Between Lines 6-7
- Lines 7-11
- Between Lines 11-12
- Lines 12-17
- Between Lines 17-18
- Lines 18-25
- Between Lines 25-26
- Lines 26-32
- Between Lines 32-33
- Lines 33-45
- Between Lines 45-46
- Lines 46-54
- Between Lines 54-55
- Lines 55-65
- Between Lines 65-66
- Lines 66-70
- Between Lines 70-71
- Lines 71-77
- Between Lines 77-78
- Lines 78-88
- Between Lines 88-89
- Lines 89-98
- Between Lines 98-99
- Lines 99-107
- Between Lines 107-108
- Lines 108-162
- Between Lines 162-163
- Lines 163-184
- Between Lines 184-185
- Lines 185-206

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.
Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

The speaker begins by saying that he grieved when "lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd," meaning that he went through a period of mourning during springtime (which is when lilacs bloom). He also sets the scene by describing a bright "star" on the western horizon (most likely Venus, the brightest thing in the western sky during spring). The speaker also adds that he will "mourn" each time spring returns and brings back these images—images that evoke thoughts of a lost loved one ("him I love").

Although the speaker doesn't directly name of this loved one, the context of the poem helps make sense of these opening lines. The poem was published in 1865, the same year President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Written in the wake of this national tragedy, the poem describes the speaker's grief and sense of loss surrounding the president's death. Instead of stating the president's name, the speaker expresses his grief through imagery and metaphor.

To that end, the fact that the speaker mentions lilacs is

significant because they bloom in the spring, thus representing the first signs of new life after winter. This hints at a kind of *metaphorical* winter, as if Lincoln's assassination plunged the nation into a state of mourning that was as cold and unforgiving as a harsh winter. The image of the lilacs therefore suggests that new life is possible even after loss, even if this new life also brings with it a renewed sense of grief.

The star in the western sky is also symbolic. In the Bible, the star of Bethlehem signaled the birth of Christ. But in the poem, the speaker describes the star as *falling* from the sky, thus symbolizing Lincoln's premature death while still subtly presenting him as a Christ-like figure, someone who may redeem the country as a whole.

The speaker reaffirms this biblical connection by saying that spring will always bring back this "trinity" of the lilac, the star, and the thoughts of Lincoln. The "trinity" alludes to the biblical trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. But the "trinity" in this poem consists of ordinary things in the natural world—the lilac bush, the star in the sky, and even memories of someone who has died. The speaker suggests that these things too are sacred, and that in losing Lincoln, the nation has lost a spiritual leader.

Several poetic devices in these lines reinforce their meaning. First, the speaker repeats the word "mourn," in the past tense ("mourn'd") and then in the future tense. This polyptoton conveys the sense that the speaker's grief and mourning is ongoing.

At the same time, the repetition of the phrase "ever-returning spring" suggests that spring *too* is eternal and continuously returning. Taken together, this repetition suggests that mourning and death are a constant for the speaker, but so too is the reality of springtime and new life.

The internal rhyme of "spring" and "bring" affirms this sense, showing that spring will always bring a renewed sense of grief for the speaker, but will also offer other things—such as the scent of lilacs. Finally, the alliterative /l/ sounds in "lilacs" and "last" simply adds a musical effect to the poem's opening line, showcasing the speaker's lyrical and nostalgic tone.

LINES 7-11

O powerful western fallen star!
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

The speaker dramatically expresses the grief and confusion he feels in the wake of Lincoln's death. He directly addresses the western star (which represents Lincoln), describing this star as "powerful" but also "fallen." This instance of apostrophe leads the speaker to address his nighttime surroundings as a whole, as well as his own feelings of helplessness in the face of Lincoln's death.

The speaker uses anaphora to repeat the word "O" at the beginning of each line in the stanza. This allows the speaker to list off certain aspects of his surroundings, yelling out not just to the western star, but also to the "shades of night" and "the black murk that hides the star." By calling out to these things, the speaker personifies the entire night, presenting it as "moody" and full of sadness. This, in turn, reflects his own emotional state.

More specifically, the speaker laments that the star has been hidden behind the shadowy darkness of night. The image of "murk" suggests that the night is cloudy, but it also implicitly calls to mind the idea of muck or dirt covering a grave. The consonance of "black" and "murk" also ties the words together and calls attention to the image of darkness obscuring the speaker's vision of the star.

Unable to see the star, the speaker addresses "cruel hands," which he claims "hold [him] powerless." This image of the "hands" personifies the speaker's own grief and perhaps the entire situation, suggesting that the speaker experiences his feeling of powerlessness as though he is literally "held" back from doing anything about it. He then laments the fact that his own soul is "helpless" in the face of his overwhelming loss.

Finally, the speaker brings these images together, crying out about the "harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul." Here, the clouds of night become a metaphor for the speaker's own grief and confusion. This sense of loss, the poem implies, is like a kind of cloud that surrounds everything and imprisons the speaker's soul.

Three important words repeat in these lines: "star," "night," and "soul." This combination of words—emphasized through their repetition—suggests that the "night" that has covered up the star is also a kind of *spiritual* night, or a form of darkness within the speaker himself (within his soul). The setting of the poem therefore metaphorically represents the speaker's *internal* world, suggesting that he has lost his own interior sense of light, direction, and purpose because of President Lincoln's death.

LINES 12-17

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,

A sprig with its flower I break.

The speaker returns to the image of the lilac bush, noting that it grows in front of an "old farm-house" by a fence painted white. This description depicts an ordinary, everyday scene, suggesting that the lilac bush is growing wild in a rural or domestic setting.

Despite the ordinary quality of this scene, the speaker finds the lilac bush somewhat *extra*ordinary, praising it and using imagery to emphasize its beauty. He focuses on its "rich green" leaves, which are shaped like hearts. He also meditates on the actual blossoms on the bush, saying that they have a "perfume" that he loves. In fact, the speaker asserts that "every leaf" of this lilac bush is a "miracle," framing the otherwise unremarkable bush as something amazing and awe-inspiring.

Given the speaker's effusive praise of the lilac bush, it becomes clear that the bush is much more than a simple plant, at least to the speaker. For him, it is a symbolic representation of the idea that beauty can emerge in even the most harrowing times.

The speaker's language underscores this point by vividly evoking the lushness of this lilac bush. The speaker's description is full of hyphenated words, including "farm-house," "white-wash'd," "lilac-bush," "tall-growing," and "heart-shaped." These hyphenated phrases create a kind of density within the poem, effectively imitating the densely growing leaves and flowers of the lilac. The alliteration of the /w/ sound in "**w**hite-**w**ash'd" also adds rhythm and musicality to this section, sweeping readers into the stanza.

The speaker also uses anaphora by repeating the word "with" at the beginning of lines 14, 15, and 16:

> **With** many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
> **With** every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,
> **With** delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,

This creates a consistent rhythm while also implying that the speaker could go on praising the lilac bush forever, continuously listing all the things that make the bush so appealing.

After devoting five long lines to describing and praising the lilac bush, the speaker finally breaks off a "sprig with its flower." In doing so, he takes part of this bush with him—an important detail, since the bush symbolizes beauty and resiliency in the face of sadness and hardship. By taking a piece of the bush along with him, then, the speaker gives himself a physical reminder of the human capacity to endure grief.

LINES 18-25

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.
Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.
Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

In the fourth section of the poem, the speaker shifts away from his descriptions of the lilac bush and the star to describe something else: a bird singing alone in a swamp. This section is visually distinct from the first three, since it features shorter lines and is made up of three separate stanzas—namely, a couplet followed by two tercets. Whereas sections 1 through 3 feature stanzas made up of long lines, this section looks more delicate, contrasting the lush density of the lilac bush.

The speaker describes the "secluded recesses" of a swamp, which is where the bird sings its lonely song. This setting juxtaposes the setting of the lilac bush, which sits in the front yard of a farmhouse. The bird, by contrast, is isolated from human civilization. The speaker even describes the bird as "shy and hidden," going on to suggest that he is a kind of "hermit" who has "withdrawn to himself" to avoid human activity.

But the speaker also personifies the bird by describing it as "shy." Although its surroundings seem at odds with human civilization, then, there is something vaguely human about the bird itself. It lives in isolation, but its song seems to express something the speaker can relate to and understand in human terms. The bird is therefore connected to human life even if he's also removed from it.

In the last three lines of this section, the speaker says this bird's song is a "song of the bleeding throat." This metaphorically suggests that the song expresses the same kind of agony and pain that might come from the "bleeding throat" of a dying person. The speaker also suggests that the song is "[d]eath's outlet song of life," implying that death finds a kind of release or expression in this song. Death, in other words, is present in the bird's melody.

At the same time, the speaker says that the bird is alive and in fact *needs* to sing to continue to live: "for well dear brother I know," the speaker says, addressing the bird as a familiar and personified "brother" and saying, "If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die." This implies that certain kinds of expression are necessary to a person's survival—which is perhaps why the speaker himself wants to work through his own grief in this poem.

In keeping with this, the speaker identifies with the bird throughout these lines. They both, after all, sing a song of death. The bird is a part of the natural world in which the speaker hears something of his own experience reflected. The repetition of "sing" and "song" throughout this section reinforces the necessity and urgency of the song the speaker

describes—both the bird's own song and the song of the poem itself.

LINES 26-32

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

After describing a solitary bird removed from human society, the speaker depicts a public and historical event: Lincoln's funeral train, which carried Lincoln's body from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois, where he was buried. This train made numerous stops along the way, so that people across the country could pay their respects.

The speaker describes the journey of this train through "the spring [and] the land" and "amid cities." Interestingly, the reader doesn't actually find out until the *end* of the section what, exactly, is on this journey, since the speaker waits until line 32 to say, "Night and day journeys the coffin." In a sense, the poem *enacts* the journey that the train undergoes, delaying the sentence's subject (the "coffin") and verb ("journeys") until the very end.

The reader, then, undergoes the journey along *with* the train, moving through each line of the section and the imagery the speaker presents. The train, the speaker says, travels through "lanes" and "old woods" where violets have recently "peep'd from the ground." As the section goes along, the speaker emphasizes this sense of emerging spring. The train passes "the yellow-spear'd wheat," conveying an image of wheat that resembles yellow spikes, and also says that "every grain" of the wheat has "uprisen" out of its "shroud." This suggests that the wheat has sprouted from the husk of its seeds. More importantly, the speaker subtly depicts these husks as metaphorical "shroud[s]"—a kind of funeral cloth used to cover a dead body.

This alludes to and develops the speaker's use of religious imagery. The speaker connects the springtime when Lincoln died to the crucifixion of Christ, which according to the Bible also occurred in the spring. Building on this connection, the poem suggests that just as Christ rose from the dead, so too has Lincoln's death made a form of new life possible. The image of wheat rising out of its "shroud" suggests that the land *itself*—and thus the nation—will flourish again, even after this period of emotional winter and grief.

The speaker continues to develop this idea in the line that follows, describing apple blossoms as "blows of white and pink in the orchards." While the word "blows" suggests a kind of violence, the image is also beautiful, and the colors of "pink and white" emphasize the blossoms' delicacy and softness. The image conveys the simultaneous reality of grief *and* the reemergence of life, suggesting that both are present in this moment.

Throughout these lines, the anaphora of "amid" in lines 27 and 28 and then of "passing" in lines 29 and 30 knits these images together:

> Amid lanes and through old woods, [...]
> Amid the grass in the fields [...]
> Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, [...]
> Passing the apple-tree blows [...]

This repetition creates a pleasing sound and also unifies otherwise diverse landscapes. The speaker's use of anaphora also pairs well with the asyndeton in these lines, as each image leads into the next without connecting words or conjunctions. This creates a seamless feeling in the scene while also mimicking the train's forward momentum.

This momentum finally reaches a conclusion at the end of the section, when the speaker describes the train and what it carries. "Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave," the speaker says, "Night and day journeys a coffin." The alliterative hard /c/ sound in "carrying," "corpse," and "coffin" contrasts with the soft, vivid images of springtime that led up to this point, reminding the reader of the sad reality that it is Lincoln's coffin traveling through all of this. Despite the beauty of the surrounding landscape, then, the harsh reality of death is still present in the poem.

LINES 33-38

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,
With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing,
With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads,

The speaker continues to describe the funeral train's journey, now focusing on the public expressions of grief in the towns and cities through which the train passes.

This section of the poem begins with the word "coffin," which was also the last word of the previous section. This reminds readers of the harsh reality of Lincoln's death. When the speaker continues to describe the coffin's journey through

"lanes and streets" and "day and night," the poem emphasizes the continual movement of the train and Lincoln's body across the United States. And all the while, "the great cloud darken[s] the land."

This image of a dark cloud covering everything recalls the image from the poem's second section, in which the speaker described black clouds covering the star in the western sky. In that section, the imagery of clouds and "black murk" metaphorically represented the act of violence that eclipsed Lincoln as the nation's leader, as well as the speaker's overwhelming sense of grief and confusion. Here, the speaker suggests that this cloud of violence, grief, and confusion hovers over *all* of the United States, "darkening" not just the speaker's own internal experience, but "the land" itself.

The dark cloud also juxtaposes the details of spring and new life in the preceding section, suggesting that despite the time of year, the United States as a whole is still undergoing a period of spiritual and emotional darkness or winter.

The speaker goes on to describe mourners all across the country, as they emerge to meet the funeral train and pay their respects. First, the speaker depicts "cities" and "states" in their entirety, describing ceremonies of flags and the cities themselves "draped in black" to express grief. The speaker also compares these states to "crape-veil'd women."

- Historically, women in mourning would wear a black type of thin fabric, which is why the speaker suggests that the cities and states as a whole are "dressed" like grieving women. This personification suggests that the entire country is collectively experiencing the kind of grief usually felt by individual widows.

Describing a nighttime scene, the speaker mentions "flambeaus"—or flaming torches—in the darkness. So many people have emerged to express their grief, the speaker says, that they are a "silent sea of faces and [...] unbared heads." This metaphorically depicts the crowds of mourners as a kind of quiet ocean: the many individual faces are unified in this shared experience of loss.

Throughout these images, anaphora and asyndeton drive the speaker's list. The repetition of "with" at the beginning of lines 35 through 38 emphasizes that this grief is experienced *throughout* the country, by so many people and in so many different ways. At the same time, the use of asyndeton propels the speaker's descriptions, as the reader undertakes this journey along with the train and the nation as a whole.

LINES 39-45

With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn,
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey,
With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,
Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

The speaker conjures an image of a "waiting depot," or train station, with the "arriving coffin" and the "sombre," or solemn, "faces" of people who have come out to pay their respects. Interestingly, after the many things the speaker has described in the plural (the "countless torches," the "processions" and the "cities draped in black"), here the speaker asks the reader to imagine, just for a moment, a *single* stop of the funeral train, at one *particular* train station.

Yet this singular moment quickly broadens out again, as the speaker talks about just how many people are gathered around the train at this one stop. He describes "dirges," or elegies, sung in "the night" by a "thousand voices." Just as, before, the image of the "silent sea of faces" conveyed numerous people unified in an experience of grief, these "thousand voices" are unified in their songs of mourning, and their voices are "strong and solemn."

- Also note how the sibilant alliteration in "strong" and "solemn" recalls the sibilance of "silent sea," connecting the two images together and contributing to the sense unified, shared experience.

The speaker continues to build on this imagery of grief, describing "dim-lit churches," "shuddering organs," and "the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang." Here, the speaker depicts people within churches commemorating Lincoln's death, through nighttime services, organ music, and bells ringing continuously. The assonance of short /i/ sounds in "dim" and "lit" reinforces the sense of "dimness" within this scene, like the dark cloud the speaker previously described. The repetition of "tolling," meanwhile, emphasizes the ongoing state of grief the nation is experiencing.

Then, near the end of the section, the speaker shifts from describing these many public, collective expressions of grief, to his *own* action to commemorate Lincoln. First, the speaker addresses Lincoln's coffin directly in a form of apostrophe: "where amid these you journey," the speaker says. This direct address suggests that despite all the public, shared expressions of grief, the speaker experiences his own grief in an intimate, personal way.

"Here," the speaker says, "coffin that slowly passes, / I give you my sprig of lilac." After the descriptions of crowds of mourners around the country, the speaker shifts to the first person "I" and to one single expression of respect, as he offers the coffin, and

Lincoln's body, the "sprig of lilac" that he plucked from the lilac bush previously in the poem.

The ending of this section has several effects:

1. First, while the speaker has evoked vast numbers of people in mourning, this moment emphasizes *one* person's actions, as the speaker brings this lilac branch to the train. This suggests that despite the fact that the nation as a whole is in mourning, the speaker also experiences his *own* mourning in a separate, private way.
2. Second, the speaker's simple "sprig of lilac" juxtaposes with the grandeur and ceremony the speaker has just described, in the flags, black fabric, and organ music of churches.

The speaker offers Lincoln's body a living thing, a flowering branch, and a symbol of springtime. This image suggests that perhaps it is not grandeur and ceremony that can best honor a national leader who is so beloved, but something every day, and beautiful. The assonance of short /i/ sounds in "give" and "sprig" imply that this small branch truly *is* a "gift" since it is an offering of natural beauty and personal affection.

LINES 46-54

(Nor for you, for one alone,
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred death.
All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

The seventh section signals a turn in the poem, as the speaker shifts from mourning the death of Lincoln alone, to mediating on death more broadly.

The speaker addresses death directly (another moment of apostrophe), saying "thus would I chant a song for you O [...] death." In other words, the speaker suggests, for the first time, that the poem (his "song") is not addressed *only* to Lincoln but maybe also to death as a whole.

This apostrophe indirectly personifies death, conjuring not just the "coffins" of people who have died, but death as a being with agency who has brought about the ends of these individual lives. Despite the grief that pervades the poem, the speaker seems to *praise* death here as "sane and sacred." The parentheses that enclose this section suggest that what the speaker says here is a kind of aside to himself; this seems to be the speaker's private, personal response to death.

The speaker imagines "break[ing]" numerous branches of flowers and bringing "roses," "early lilies" and "lilac[s]" to cover death in a gesture of both mourning and respect. The alliterative /b/ sounds in "blossoms and branches" and sibilant /s/ sounds in "sane and sacred" draw attention to what the speaker describes, suggesting that death truly is "sacred" and worthy of this praise and these flowers.

These lines also bring together images of violence and death with images of natural beauty, springtime, and life:

- The speaker repeats the phrase "I break," describing breaking off "sprigs [of lilac] from the bushes."
- The word "break" suggests rupture and violence, but the word's repetition also recalls the lushness and bountifulness of the lilac bush that the speaker previously described.
- Altogether, then, the speaker suggests that these flowers—and the speaker's own gesture of praise for death (his breaking of them)—is endless.
- The speaker also suggests that if death, and these coffins, are endless, so too is the beauty of the flowers that the speaker will bring "[w]ith loaded arms [...] pouring for you."

This shift in the poem, as the speaker turns to address and praise death directly, suggests that while the speaker mourns the loss of Lincoln, he also in a sense acknowledges *all* people's deaths as equally important, and even honors death itself for its power and presence. What's more, all the natural imagery of "roses," "lilies," and "lilacs" suggests that death too is natural. The speaker again emphasizes that out of these early flowers he values "mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first," and that signals the very beginning of springtime. This image, then, brings together imagery of death with imagery of new life, suggesting that the two are connected.

LINES 55-60

O western orb sailing the heaven,
Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd,
As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,
As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,)
As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,)

In another moment of apostrophe, the speaker addresses the "western star" that he described at the beginning of the poem—personifying it, speaking to it like a friend. He recalls a time when he was walking at night and the star seemed to come down out of the sky to tell him something. "Now I know what you must have meant," the speaker says, suggesting that now that Lincoln has been assassinated, he can understand what the

star "meant" previously, when he "saw you had something to tell me."

When this star appeared earlier in the poem, falling tragically early from the sky, it unmistakably represented Lincoln. Here, the speaker describes this star in a familiar, intimate way, as though he alone communed with the star, and the star came out of the sky to address him privately. This speaker seems to feel a personal, intimate grief over Lincoln—the grief one would feel for a friend, not just a public figure!

The speaker's use of parentheticals within these lines reinforces the sense of a personal, conversational moment. In these parentheticals, he mentions that "the other stars look'd on," personifying all of the stars, and then that "something I know not what kept me from sleep." These parentheticals sound like colloquial asides, suggesting that the speaker really is addressing this star—and by extension, Lincoln— as a friend.

Sound effects within these lines also convey the sense of a personal, intimate moment. Sibilant sounds recur throughout, both in the anaphoric word "[a]s," which drives the lines, and in the alliterative sibilance of "silence," "shadowy," "saw," "something," "sky," "side," "stars," "solemn," "something," and "sleep." These hushed, sibilant sounds create a sense of privacy, intimacy, and quiet.

LINES 61-65

As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,
As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,
As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night,
As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,
Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

The speaker continues to speak to the western star, remembering in an apostrophe "how full you were of woe," or deep sadness. Continuing to use the anaphora of "As" to describe this moment, the speaker recalls seeing the star on the western horizon, while he himself "stood on the rising ground."

Where earlier in the night, the speaker says that the star came to his "side" and they "wander'd" or walked "together," here the star seems to be moving further away and dropping lower, to the edge of the horizon. Meanwhile, the speaker is on "rising ground," which suggests a hilltop, but also makes it seem as if, while the star is dropping, the speaker is staying in place or even on higher ground. It's as if the star's fall shakes up the whole landscape.

On this changing terrain, the speaker "watch'd where you pass'd" into "the netherward," or lowest "black of the night." In other words, the speaker has lost sight of the star as it seems to pass over the sky, away from him, and then drop down into the darkest place near the horizon. The alliteration of /n/ sounds in "netherward" and "night" draws attention to this vivid image, suggesting that the star has been lost in the darkest and deepest parts of the night sky.

Here, the poem juxtaposes the speaker with the star. While the speaker stands watching in the "cool transparent night"—the word "transparent" conveying clarity and visibility—the star is "lost" in the "black of the night." This imagery recalls the "black murk" that hid the star back in line 9, and the "great cloud darkening the land" over Lincoln's funeral train. The speaker is still in the relative lightness of the living world, while the star—Lincoln—has disappeared in death.

Yet even though the star has disappeared from view and the speaker is still in the clear air, the speaker's soul goes with the star and mirrors its movements: "my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank," the speaker says. Just as the star dropped into the dark of the night, the speaker's soul too has dropped into spiritual darkness.

The ending of the section emphasizes this mirroring, as the speaker says, "as where you, sad orb, / Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone." The speaker suggests that when he saw the star disappear—perhaps foreshadowing Lincoln's death—he felt his own soul "sink" into sadness and grief. The word "gone" at the end of the section reinforces this sense of loss, and the absolute, irrevocable nature of death.

LINES 66-70

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.

In the poem's ninth section, the speaker turns back to the bird singing in the swamp. Addressing this bird again directly, the speaker tells it to keep singing ("[s]ing on") and speaks to it fondly and intimately, as "O singer bashful and tender."

It is worth noting that at this point in the poem, the speaker has directly addressed the star, the bird, Lincoln's coffin, and death itself. These are all instances of apostrophe—none of these can be expected to reply—yet the speaker addresses them all in a tone of praise, and often familiarity and love. The word "O," which signals these moments of apostrophe, also links everything the speaker addresses together, so that Lincoln's coffin, the star that represents Lincoln, the singing bird, and death are all implicitly connected through the speaker's "song." While the poem's sections shift back and forth between these different images, then, they are also part of a larger whole, and this interconnection subtly suggests that death itself isn't so separate from the living world, but perhaps an integral part of it.

Now, addressing this bird singing its song of death, the speaker urges it to go on singing and asserts, "I hear your notes, I hear your call, / I hear." The insistent repetition of "I hear" signals the speaker's ongoing identification and closeness with the bird, suggesting that the speaker relates to the bird's song and not only hears it but understands it. And in fact, as the speaker goes on to say, "I come presently, I understand you." Implicitly, the speaker wants to walk away from his current setting—and maybe the living, human world altogether—and join the bird. Yet, he notes, "a moment I linger," because "the lustrous star has detain'd me." In other words, the speaker is held back from joining the bird by the need to continue to be present with the star, with his "departing comrade," Lincoln. The speaker repeats the word "detain'd" (the past tense of "detain") in its present tense form, "detains," an instant of polyptoton that emphasizes the need the speaker feels to continue to be present and memorialize the great leader who has died.

Sound effects throughout these lines give them a quality of music and contribute to their meaning. The sibilant sounds in "sing," "swamp," "singer," "bashful" convey a kind of quiet hush around the singing bird, a sense that it inhabits a world set apart from human activity. These sounds contrast with the hard /d/ sounds in "departing" and "detains," suggesting that the private space of the bird is different from the public setting the speaker currently inhabits. Additionally, /st/ sounds (along with closely placed /r/ sounds) consonantly link "understand," "lustrous," and "star," conveying the beauty of this star while also connecting the star's presence to the speaker's understanding of the bird's song. Implicitly, the speaker feels the presence of the bird's song of death as he contemplates the "star" that has been lost.

LINES 71-77

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?
Sea-winds blown from east and west,
Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there on the prairies meeting,
These and with these and the breath of my chant,
I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

As he listens to the bird's song, the speaker asks rhetorically what kind of "warble" or song *he* could sing to honor this leader who he "loved." Again, the speaker doesn't name Lincoln directly, but calls him "the dead one there" and "him I love." These intimate words show the profound love the speaker feels for the American leader—and perhaps makes these musings on grief feel universal, too, relevant to anyone who mourns.

"[H]ow," the speaker asks, "shall I deck" (or decorate) "my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?" The consonance of /s/ and /l/ sounds in "song," "large," "sweet" and "soul" indeed make these words sound musical as a "song." And when the speaker asks what kind of "perfume" he can bring to the "grave," those consonant /r/ sounds make it sound as though the speaker has already "perfumed" the grave *through* the poem. Perhaps the speaker is answering some of his own questions about how to grieve through the writing of this very poem!

In the second stanza of this section, the speaker replies to his own questions—or at least, to the third question, of what "perfume" he can bring to the gravesite. Instead of an artificial scent, the speaker suggests that the most appropriate "perfume" for Lincoln's grave is sea air—"[s]ea-winds blown from east and west." These winds off of both coasts—"[b]lown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea"—will, the speaker says, meet "on the prairies." Here, the speaker alludes to the fact that Lincoln was from Illinois, and was also buried there; his gravesite is right in the middle of the country. This image subtly suggests that Lincoln, and his grave, are in the heart of the country, unifying both sides of the country and their "sea-winds."

Just as the speaker suggested that his "sprig of lilac" was the best gift to honor this fallen leader, he implies that it is natural sea air, not pomp and ceremony, that can best "perfume" the grave. But he'll also offer the "breath of [his] chant," or his own breath exhaled as he sings his "song." This most personal offering, combined with the natural offering of the land itself, is, the speaker implies, the best way to truly pay respect to "him I love."

In an instant of polyptoton, the speaker repeats "east" and "west" in the slightly different forms of "Eastern sea" and "Western sea." He also repeats the words "perfume" and "grave," and the phrase "him I love." These repeated words make even the speaker's questions sound like a kind of "chant" or song—and emphasize the love the speaker feels for Lincoln.

LINES 78-88

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?
Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright,
With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air,
With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific,
In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there,
With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows,
And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys,
And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the

workmen homeward returning.

In the next section, the speaker moves from seeking "perfume" for Lincoln's grave to asking what "pictures" he can use to decorate the tomb. The parallelism of these lines echoing the opening of the previous section with its sequence of rhetorical questions.

"O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?" the speaker asks, echoing line 71, and then, "what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls [...] of him I love?" The speaker also uses repetition *within* these questions, repeating "what shall," "hang," and "chamber walls." As before, this repetition makes the speaker's questions sound like a kind of chant, as his *wondering* how to eulogize Lincoln becomes part of the eulogy itself.

As before, the speaker answers his own questions, describing "pictures" that he will bring to "adorn" Lincoln's tomb. While he's not actually bringing pictures to the tomb, in a sense he does decorate Lincoln's grave through his poem's imagery.

Just as the speaker suggested that the best "perfume" for the grave would be natural sea winds, the "pictures" the speaker imagines bringing to the tomb here are images of the United States as a whole.

He imagines comforting "[p]ictures of growing spring and farms and homes"; these "pictures" recall the landscapes earlier in the poem, when the speaker described the funeral train's journey. The speaker further emphasizes this connection by describing "the Fourth-month even at sundown." The "Fourth-month" alludes to the month of April, when Lincoln was assassinated. Perhaps the best the speaker can offer Lincoln is all of the natural beauty that surrounds him, even in this time of grief.

The speaker's next images—"floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun," "fresh sweet herbage," and "pale green leaves" on the "prolific" or numerous trees—all overflow with fresh, springtime life. Even if that sun is "sinking" (like the "sinking" star), it's also vital and rich. Despite his grief, the speaker wants to commemorate Lincoln with images of life.

The speaker also imagines describes human life in this beautiful landscape, including a busy, crowded city (the alliteration of /d/ sounds in "dwellings so dense" emphasizing this), clusters of "chimneys," and "workmen" going home at the end of the day. These images of industry and working-class life, the speaker suggests, are also beautiful and worthy of inclusion in the "pictures" brought to Lincoln's grave.

Throughout these lines, the anaphora of "[w]ith" and "[a]nd" connect the images together. The speaker also uses asyndeton to create a feeling of overwhelming, lush richness.

The best way to truly honor Lincoln, these lines suggest, is through depicting the United States itself, in all of its varied specificity.

LINES 89-98

Lo, body and soul—this land,
My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships,
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio's shores and flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.
Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,
The gentle soft-born measureless light,
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

Continuing his praise of the U.S., the speaker calls the land "body and soul," suggesting that it is living and unified. He describes places around the country, including "[m]y own Manhattan"— the speaker's hometown—with its tall buildings, or "spires," and "the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships." In this image, the /sp/ sound of "spires" alliterates with "sparkling," connecting the man-made buildings with the natural world. Consonant /r/ sounds link "sparkling and hurrying" together. This musical patterning suggests that this speaker sees humanity and nature as parts of one lovely, continuous whole.

The speaker then goes on a whirlwind imaginary tour of the "varied and ample" country, depicting "the South and North in the light," as well as the Ohio and Missouri Rivers. These descriptions of the South and North subtly allude to the American Civil War. But in the speaker's description, both are unified into a larger whole, a single land "in the light."

The speaker then praises the sun that unifies this land in its "light," and evokes the passage of time from morning until night. The speaker personifies the "most excellent sun so calm and haughty"—words that could also describe Lincoln. He evokes an early morning with "just-felt breezes" and the new light, "gentle" and "soft-born." The internal rhyme of "morn" and "born" reinforces this connection, as though the first light of day is a kind of newborn baby. Meanwhile, the /m/ sound in "morn" repeats alliteratively in "measureless" suggesting that dawn brings with it a feeling of infinite possibility. The sound recurs again in the next line, at the beginning of "miracle," as the speaker suggests that time, and the light of the sun, are miracles "bathing all."

Later in the day, the speaker imagines, come the comforts of "fulfill'd noon," then the "coming eve" and "the welcome night and the stars." In this description, the night that the speaker previously presented as a time of "black murk" becomes a beautiful part of a complete day. The darkness that has symbolized death becomes just another part of the cycle of nature: a huge emotional shift! Subtly, the speaker suggests

that nighttime (and by extension death) is simply part of a larger cycle of life, and that this cycle itself is miraculous. Anaphora on "the" and continuous asyndeton also suggest that this cycle is infinite and ongoing.

At the end of this section, the stars in the nighttime sky shine "[o]ver my cities all [...] enveloping man and land." Here, the speaker depicts this envelopment into night as something positive and "welcome." And just as the sunlight unified disparate parts of the country, the light of the stars and moon, too, shine over everything, bringing the country together into a unified whole.

LINES 99-107

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes,
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.
Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.
O liquid and free and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!
You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

In another apostrophe, the speaker turns back to the "gray-brown bird" that is singing in the swamp, and again asks it to "[s]ing on, sing on." Through all of his imaginative travels across the country, the speaker suggests, he's still been able to hear this bird's song.

"Sing from the swamps, the recesses," the speaker tells the bird; "pour your chant from the bushes." The hushed sibilance of "sing," "swamps," and "recesses" connects the bird's song to where the bird lives—a private, quiet place, removed from everyday human life. At the same time, the word "chant"—which the speaker uses here to describe the bird's song—recalls how the speaker referred to his own poem, when he said he would "perfume" Lincoln's grave with "the breath of [his] chant."

The bird's song "pour[s]" like water, "limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines." But it's also a "[l]oud human song, with [a] voice of uttermost woe." This animal's song is notably "human," reinforcing the identification between the speaker and the bird and suggesting that the bird shares the speaker's grief. In fact, the speaker again refers to the bird here as a "brother." Even though the bird inhabits a world apart from human society, it says something fundamental about human existence through its song.

That song, "liquid and free and tender," feels "wild and loose to [his] soul," somehow relieving the speaker's feelings. In this description, soft alliterative and consonant /l/ sounds connect "liquid," "loose," and "soul" and /w/ sounds link "wild" and "wondrous," suggesting the unity and gentleness of the song.

While the speaker finds comfort and connection in this song, he can't yet join the bird. Instead, he has to stay with "the star" and the "the lilac" with its strong, or "mastering," scent—to keep memorializing Lincoln. But the star "will soon depart." Since the star has, throughout the poem, symbolized Lincoln, the speaker implies that soon Lincoln will "depart" entirely (perhaps through his burial) and the speaker can fully commune with the bird and its song of mourning.

LINES 108-116

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the farmers preparing their crops,
In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests,
In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,)
Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children and women,
The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and minutia of daily usages,
And the streets how their throbbings throbb'd, and the cities pent—

Having rejoined the bird in its dark swamp, the speaker turns back to the light, sitting "in the day" and looking around at the living world. He sees an evening "with its light and the fields of spring," "farmers preparing their crops," and "the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests." If this scenery is "unconscious," it is unaware of its own beauty. It is, simply, vibrantly alive, and *he* can enjoy it and be conscious of it.

The sky, "heavenly" after "perturb'd winds," suggests that the dark cloud the speaker previously described—a kind of metaphorical storm cloud of grief—has, at least temporarily, moved away. In its wake, the sky is beautiful and "aerial," full of a kind of airy lightness that is also "heavenly" or sacred.

Underneath these "arching heavens," the speaker describes an "afternoon swift" or bird that passes by, as well as "the voices of children and women." This "swift" subtly juxtaposes with the bird in the swamp; while that singing bird inhabits a hidden place, apart from human society, this other bird moves through the living world and past talking women and children with ease. This contrast between the two birds intensifies the contrast between this active, living world and the world the singing bird inhabits, which is private, quiet, and seems closer to knowledge of death.

Here, the speaker praises the beauty and activity of this living world, again describing the variety and richness of American landscapes. He evokes "many-moving sea tides" with "ships"

that "sail'd"; the alliteration of /m/ sounds in "many-moving" and sibilant /s/ sounds in "sea," "ships" and "sail'd" convey the bustle of this scene.

The speaker also celebrates the approach of summer, with its "richness" and the way all of the fields at this time of year are "busy with labor" or people working to plant their crops. This sense of busyness leads the speaker to also describe all of the activity of human life within this landscape: "the infinite separate houses" and the "meals and minutia of daily usages"—all of the small activities of daily human life.

And when he describes densely populated cities, with their "throbbing" streets, the repetition of "throbbing" in the slightly different form of "throbb'd"—an instance of polyptoton—emphasizes the busyness of human society, while also metaphorically comparing the streets to "throbbing" or beating hearts.

This passage recalls imagery from earlier in the poem, when the speaker imagined bringing "pictures" of diverse aspects of American landscapes and life to Lincoln's grave. But where previously the speaker's evocative descriptions have been driven by asyndeton, here he uses *polysyndeton*, joining all his images with the word "and." This polysyndeton emphasizes the lushness, diversity, and vitality of American life—a life will continue to grow and flourish, even after this period of grief and loss.

LINES 116-125

Io, then and there,
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest,
Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.
Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

But death and grief still hover over these lively scenes, a metaphorical "cloud" that falls over everything, "enveloping [the speaker] with the rest." This cloud, the speaker says, "[a]ppear'd" as a "long black trail," recalling the imagery of black mourning clothes from earlier in the poem. The anaphora of "appear'd" reinforces the cloud's awful power.

With the arrival of this cloud, the speaker says, "I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death": he has come to understand death more deeply. Even though the speaker's tone here is somber, and even though he describes the cloud as dark and ominous, he also speaks of his new understanding of death as "sacred." He has come to feel that death itself is holy.

He even personifies "the knowledge of death" and "the thought of death," imagining them walking on either side of him. They've become "companions"; he even imagines he's holding hands with them. The alliteration of /h/ sounds in "holding" and "hands" creates a hush around this newly intimate scene.

Holding hands with death, the speaker abandons the busy activity of the scene he's just described for "the hiding receiving night that talks not," entering the sheltering darkness of the bird's swamp: the "shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness." The sibilant sounds in "shores," "swamp" and "dimness" evoke the privacy and quiet of this swamp where the bird has been singing its song of death. These sibilant sounds become even more pronounced as the speaker approaches this spot, with its "solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still." Even the trees in this place, the speaker suggests, are "ghostly." Metaphorically, the speaker walks away from the living world and into the world of death.

LINES 126-134

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,
The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,
And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.
From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,
Came the carol of the bird.
And the charm of the carol rapt me,
As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,
And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

As the speaker arrives in the swamp, the singing bird "receiv[es]" him. This bird, the speaker says, is "so shy to the rest," avoiding other people—but in this instant, he welcomes the speaker along with his new comrades, "the knowledge of death" and "the thought of death."

Then, the bird who is "gray-brown"—its colors juxtaposing with the bright colors of daylight and springtime—sings "a carol of death," including "a verse for him I love." The word "carol" suggests that the bird's song is like a religious song of praise, a hymn. And "him I love" is, as ever, Lincoln himself.

Here, the poem shifts to tercets (three-line stanzas). These patterns of three might symbolize the union of the speaker, death, and the singing bird, or even allude to the holy trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The even form of the tercets creates a pattern on the page that resembles a song, linking the bird's song of death to the speaker's own "song," or poem.

Within this chant, the speaker hears the bird's song emerging from "deep secluded recesses." Metaphorically, these recesses might represent the depths of human consciousness, with which the speaker has now come into contact through his familiarity with death.

The speaker then returns to an image from the poem's previous section, depicting the "fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still" where the bird is singing. The sibilant sounds in "cedars," "ghostly," "pines" and "so still" create a hush, while the repetition of the phrase "ghostly pines so still" from the previous section emphasizes the "ghostly" quality of the whole scene, as though the speaker has left the fully living world and now inhabits an in-between realm. At the end of this tercet, the hard /c/ sound in "[c]ame" repeats alliteratively in "carol," connecting the bird's song, or "carol" again to the speaker's "comrades"—the "knowledge of death" and the "thought of death."

This song casts a spell over the speaker, holding him "rapt." But he rises to the occasion: he says that his spirit "tallied," or met and sang along with, "the song of the bird" while he "held as if by their hands" his "comrades in the night." Here, the speaker again integrates these lines through patterns of sounds, in the hard /c/ sounds of "carol" and "comrades" and /h/ sounds of "held" and "hands." These sounds emphasize the intimacy and privacy of the speaker's new connection with death and the bird.

LINES 135-142

Come lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.
Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

In this passage, the speaker recounts what the bird sings—and how the speaker's spirit sings along. Through this italicized song-within-a-song, the bird and the speaker address death directly in another apostrophe.

Praising death as "lovely" and "soothing," the speaker and the bird ask death to come closer or approach them. They describe the way in which death "undulate[s]" like water "round the world," calmly "arriving, arriving" to everyone "[s]ooner or later."

In this first quatrain of the song, the speaker emphasizes the way death reaches everyone at some point. This equalizing power, the speaker suggests, is part of what makes death worthy of praise. The repetition of "arriving" and the anaphora of "in the" and "to" emphasize the omnipotence of death, which can arrive at day or night and will arrive "to all" and "to each." Finally, the alliterative /d/ sounds in "delicate death" call attention to these words and emphasize the speaker's praise.

The speaker goes on to praise the "universe" which is "fathomless" or infinite, as well as "life and joy" and "objects and knowledge curious"—or all things and knowledge that are interesting and strange. The assonance of short /o/ sounds in "objects" and "knowledge" creates a musical pattern in this phrase, which the speaker develops through the slant rhyme of "universe" and "curious." These sound echoes and close rhymes help to distinguish this "song" from the rest of the poem, and to make it sound like a song! The speaker then gives thanks for "love, sweet love," with the repetition of "love" emphasizing its importance.

Yet most of all, the speaker says, praise should be given to death. Here, the speaker repeats the word "praise" three times, calling attention to the word and distinguishing death from the other items in the speaker's list. Death, the speaker says, is "sure-enwinding" (it will surely "enwind" or enclose everyone) and also "cool-enfolding" (it will enfold people in its cool "arms"). These descriptions subtly personify death and also create a parallel structure in the line, since both are hyphenated and combine an adjective ("sure"/ "cool") with an adverb ("enwinding"/ "enfolding"). This parallelism suggests that death has a kind of intrinsic balance and approaches everyone with evenness and equality.

LINES 143-150

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.
Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

As the speaker and bird sing on, the speaker builds on his earlier personification of death, now imagining death as a "mother" who is "dark" and "glide[s]" over the earth with "soft feet." This personification suggests that death is not something to be feared, but rather a mother-figure who will eventually welcome everyone.

The speaker asks rhetorically if no one has previously praised death, or "chanted [...] a chant" to honor death. No? Then ***he*** will "chant it for thee" and asserts that he "glorif[ies] thee above all." This apostrophe feels intimate and close, since the speaker calls death "thee" (an old-fashioned and affectionate form of "you," like "tu" in French). The speaker acknowledges that death will eventually come for everyone, including him: "thou must indeed come." So, the speaker says, "come unfalteringly." The speaker will not shun death, but welcome her as a "deliveress" who rescues humans from life's pain. And"[w]hen it is so, when thou has taken them," he will "joyously sing the dead." Though the speaker here is talking in a general way, this remark also seems to refer to the poem itself, which elegizes and mourns Lincoln but also joyfully celebrates life *and* death.

Now, the speaker describes death metaphorically as an ocean or vast body of water. Those who have died, he says, are "[l]ost in the loving floating ocean of thee." This image suggests that

when people die, they are "lost" but not in a negative sense; rather, they go into this "loving floating ocean" of death as a whole. Building on this image, the speaker says that the dead are "[l]aved," or washed, in this "flood of thy bliss O death." Here, the speaker suggests that death is a purifying experience, since the dead are washed in this infinite "flood" of death's "bliss" or happiness. In these lines, alliterative /l/ sounds in "lost," "loving," "floating," "laved" and "flood" create a sense of softness and continuity, enacting this gentle "flood" of death that the speaker describes.

LINES 151-158

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.
The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Having come to loving terms with death, the speaker celebrates her like a goddess, sending her "glad serenades," "[d]ances," "adornments," and "feastings."

But his most fitting gift would be "sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky," as well as "life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night." These images recall the "pictures" that the speaker imagined bringing to Lincoln's grave.

He returns, too, to his earlier imagery of the night, "in silence under many a star." Here, rather than depicting night as a sorrowful "black murk," he imagines night as "huge," "thoughtful," and starry. The speaker has truly come to a whole new understanding of death.

Beneath this night sky, the speaker imagines the "ocean shore" and the "husky whispering wave," whose "voice" the speaker says he "know[s]." Consonant soft /sh/ sounds in "ocean" and "shore," as well as the alliterative /w/ sounds in "whispering" and "wave," make this ocean sound gentle and tender. The speaker also subtly personifies the ocean waves as having a "voice" that is "husky" and "whispering." This personification, alongside the ongoing personification of death, makes the whole world seem alive and conscious.

Finally, the speaker imagines people who are dying—and himself at the moment of death. Dying won't be fearful, but a moment in which "the soul [turns] to thee" and "the body gratefully [nestles] close to thee," like a baby bird cozying up to its mother.

LINES 159-162

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

In the last quatrain of his italicized song, the speaker imagines "float[ing]" this song of praise through the air to death. The word "float" recalls the speaker's description of the dead as "lost" in death's "loving floating ocean," suggesting that in singing this song, the speaker is connected to death's "ocean" and to death itself.

The speaker imagines sending this song to death "over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide, / Over the dense-pack'd cities," bringing together imagery from all across the poem. This suggests that the speaker views death not as something *separate* from the living American landscape he has evoked, but as constantly present alongside it. The anaphora of the word "over" emphasizes the course of the speaker's song over the wide and varied country

The speaker also unifies his imagery through the sibilant /s/ sounds in "rising and sinking waves," and alliterative /w/ sounds in "wharves and ways." All of these aspects of the landscape, these sonic connections suggest, are part of a larger whole.

The speaker finishes his song "with joy." His song to death is a joyful one, now that he recognizes that death is an important and beautiful part of life.

LINES 163-170

To the tally of my soul,
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night.
Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,
And I with my comrades there in the night.
While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,
As to long panoramas of visions.

His song ended, the speaker returns to the swamp around him, where the "gray-brown bird" has "kept up" with his soul, singing along with "pure deliberate notes."

The notes of the bird's song, he says, were "[l]oud" through the "pines and cedars dim," amid "the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume." Here, the speaker returns to imagery he used earlier when imagining the winds with which he would "perfume" Lincoln's grave. The repetition of these words and images suggests that the speaker has come to see all of these aspects of his "song" as interconnected: the living world of sea-winds links to the speaker's song of death.

This sense of connection leads the speaker to a "vision" in which he gains an even deeper knowledge of death. He says that in this moment, the sight "bound in [his] eyes unclosed," and he had access to "long panoramas of visions." It's not his physical

sight that is now "unbound" but a kind of inner sight, that allows him greater *insight* into the realities of life and death.

LINES 171-176

And I saw askant the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.

The speaker's visions are full of war imagery. He sees "hundreds of battle-flags" carried "through the smoke of the battles" and cut through with "missiles," "torn and bloody." Finally, there are only a "few shreds" of the flags left on the "staffs," or flagpoles. Everything is silent, and even the flagpoles are "splinter'd and broken."

This imagery alludes to the American Civil War, which ended just a few days before Lincoln's assassination. Here, the flags symbolize the many soldiers who died terrible deaths on that war's battlefields. As the speaker describes the flags' deterioration, and the way they are "pierced" with weapons and bloodied, the speaker imagines the people fighting these battles going through the same things. All this violence seems pointless: the flags are merely carried "hither and yon" until death silences the scene.

The anaphora of "[a]nd" makes each item in the speaker's list lead, inevitably and terribly, to the next, suggesting that each act of violence in war leads only to more violence. Meanwhile, the sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds in "smoke," "shreds," "staffs," "silence" and "splinter'd" casts a hush over the scene, like the silence of death.

LINES 177-184

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

The speaker's vision only gets grimmer. "I saw battle-corpses," the speaker says, "myriads of them," and "the white skeletons of young men." This stark imagery creates an impression of endless death and destruction: "I saw the debris and debris," he says, "of all the slain soldiers of the war."

In these lines, the speaker's anaphoric repetition of "I saw" places him within this scene, as if he's giving a first-hand account. In his visionary trance, it's as if he's reporting not just on one battle or war, but on the deaths resulting from *all* wars. The repetition of "debris," meanwhile, communicates the terrible reality of these wars, as human lives are reduced to mere piles of rubbish.

While these images clearly allude to the American Civil War, the speaker doesn't distinguish between Union or Confederate soldiers. Instead, he simply recounts this loss of human life, lamenting *all* of these deaths equally and suggesting that the war is harmful to the entire country, no matter what side one is on. (But at the same time, this equalizing passage reinforces the values of the Union Army, which fought to keep the U.S. unified when the South tried to secede from the nation.)

While all these deaths are horrific, the speaker also observes that they're "not as was thought." Now that the soldiers are dead, they no longer suffer, but are "fully at rest."

On the contrary, it is the living who suffer. The "mother[s]" of the soldiers suffer, and "the wife and child and the musing comrade" suffer. But the dead are free. Death, again, is a "deliveress."

LINES 185-194

Passing the visions, passing the night,
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,
Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night,
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy,
Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,
As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,
Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

At last, the speaker leaves these visions, walking away from the swamp and the singing bird. His anaphora on the word "passing" helps to trace his way: he goes past the "night," past the "song of the hermit," past the "tallying song of [his] soul."

But he doesn't leave the song altogether. That song, "varying" and "ever-altering," is "[v]ictorious," reflecting a new and evolving sense of death's relationship to life and the unity of the world. The song's notes are always "rising and falling, flooding the night," making one whole out of many different notes. The alliterative /f/ sounds in "falling" and "flooding" mirror the song's continuity, one word leading musically into the next.

While this is a song of death, and does include sadness and "sinking and fainting," it also "burst[s] with joy." Here, the idea of the song itself "sinking" recalls the speaker's earlier imagery of the western star, which represented Lincoln and "sank" into the

night. Similarly, this song sinks away in sorrow—but then joyfully rises again. This description of the song's movement mimics the poem's own shift from grief to celebration. The speaker suggests that the song has a kind of dynamic, living quality, and is as varied and changing as the world that gives rise to it.

And this song hangs over the whole world, "[c]overing the earth and filling the spread of heaven" and uniting everything: the sunlight of day and of the living world; the night which metaphorically represents death; and the "song" of the bird and of poetry itself. This song isn't just any ditty, but a "psalm," a kind of prayer.

Yet the speaker begins to leave this song behind—and even leaves the "lilac with heart-shaped leaves," which he addresses, in another instant of apostrophe, as "thee."

This line brings the reader full circle, to the place where the poem began, with the beloved lilac in the "dooryard." Here, though, the speaker leaves even this living lilac, with its symbolism of both springtime and grief, behind him.

LINES 195-197

I cease from my song for thee,
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee,
O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

As the speaker leaves the lilac bush, so he prepares to leave his singing. As this poem, an elegy for Lincoln, comes to an end, the speaker will also "cease" his mourning, at least in "song."

He'll leave behind his "comrade lustrous with silver face in the night," that "western star" that symbolizes Lincoln, no longer focusing on it or attempting to "commun[e]" with it.

Yet the speaker's repetition within this three-line stanza, or tercet, suggests that this star won't really go away, even if the speaker says he's leaving it behind. Even as the speaker says he'll end "my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee," his words repeat and repeat, with the "west" and the "thee" always returning. This star, and Lincoln, are *still* central and palpably present to the speaker, even as he implies that he is leaving them behind.

LINES 198-206

Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night,
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,
With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the dead I loved so well,
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and this for his dear sake,
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

While the speaker seems to be saying goodbye to his poem in these last lines, he also feels the ongoing importance of everything he has described. "Yet each to keep and all," the speaker says, "retrievements out of the night": not only he but everyone who reads the poem can "keep" what the speaker has gathered from his visionary experiences.

Once more, he returns to "[t]he song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird" and the song his "soul" sang along with it, in a kind of "echo," and again invokes the "lustrous and drooping" western star—all still present in the speaker's imagery and recollection.

The speaker suggests that along with this star, he and the reader can "keep" the "holders holding [his] hand nearing the call of the bird," staying close to "the knowledge of death" and "the thought of death." The repetition of "holders" and "holding," an instant of polyptoton, emphasizes the continual presence of these "comrades" for the speaker." In a sense, he is *still* holding the hands of death, even if he has left behind the intensity of that moment.

The speaker will keep "their memory"—the memory of everything he has undergone—"[f]or the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands," for the sake of Lincoln's memory. At last, he returns to the three images that have driven the poem throughout: the "[l]ilac and star and bird," creatures that "twined" themselves into the "chant" of his "soul."

This set of three alludes to the "trinity" of line 4, and thus to the holy trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, three parts that make a single whole. The speaker has indeed experienced something deeply whole, and deeply holy. His grief for Lincoln—but also the larger awareness of life and death that he has gained through his song—are now part of his soul. The reader, too, can share in that transformation.

SYMBOLS

THE LILACS

The lilac that springs up throughout the poem is a rich symbol of renewal and rebirth.

The speaker revels in the lilac's beautiful scent and its heart-shaped leaves, and notes that the lilac bush is the first to bloom every spring. The lilac, then, represents the springtime reemergence of beauty, hope, and life after a period of winter or death. This reviving lilac suggests that life will continue after this period of grief and that the American people will flourish again even after Lincoln's assassination. Perhaps it holds deeper hopes, too: if nature always speaks of rebirth, perhaps there's a chance that even mortal humans aren't gone forever when they die.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,"
- **Line 5:** "Lilac blooming perennial"
- **Lines 12-17:** "In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings, / Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green, / With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love, / With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard, / With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green, / A sprig with its flower I break."
- **Lines 44-45:** "Here, coffin that slowly passes, / I give you my sprig of lilac."
- **Line 51:** "But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,"
- **Line 107:** "Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me."
- **Lines 193-194:** "I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves, / I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring."
- **Line 205:** "Lilac "

THE STAR

The "western star" that has "fallen" in the sky symbolizes Lincoln himself, who also "fell" too soon when he was assassinated. When the speaker mourns the loss of the star to darkness, he implicitly mourns the loss of the President. (Note that this "star" is actually a reference to the planet Venus.)

The speaker describes a night a month before, when he "wander'd" with the star, feeling as though it approached him to tell him something. In a terrible moment of premonition, the star falls away from the speaker's view; the speaker's "unease" seems to anticipate Lincoln's terrible death.

The star might also call to mind the Star of Bethlehem, which according to the Biblical narrative appeared in the sky when Jesus was born. This association suggests that Lincoln was a Christ-like figure, who led the American people (like a bright light in the sky), and whose death is similar to Christ's crucifixion.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,"
- **Line 5:** "drooping star in the west,"
- **Line 7:** "O powerful western fallen star!"
- **Line 9:** "O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!"
- **Lines 55-65:** "O western orb sailing the heaven, / Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd, / As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night, / As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night, / As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,) / As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,) / As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe, / As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night, / As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night, / As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb, / Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone."
- **Line 106:** "yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)"
- **Lines 196-197:** "From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee, / O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night."
- **Line 201:** "With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,"
- **Line 205:** "star"

THE BIRD

The poem's singing bird, the "thrush" who sings by himself in a "swamp," symbolizes knowledge, awareness, and acceptance of death. The speaker depicts this bird as a kind of "hermit," a religious person who has withdrawn from human society in order to live a spiritual life, seeking deeper truths.

The speaker describes the bird as singing a "carol of death." And when the speaker leaves behind the activity of daily life, approaching the swamp with the "knowledge of death" and "thought of death," he too comes to a greater understanding and even praise of death as a crucial part of life.

But the bird, like the lilac, is one of the first creatures to emerge after the winter cold and sing again; his "song," then, is a song of death, but also of the resilience of life, which continues past winter and death itself. Since the bird brings together an understanding of death *and* life, it could also be read as representing wisdom. The bird—and by extension the speaker—express this wisdom through their poetry, or "song."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-25:** "In the swamp in secluded recesses, / A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song. / Solitary the thrush, / The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements, / Sings by himself a song. / Song of the bleeding throat, / Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know, / If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)"
- **Lines 66-68:** "Sing on there in the swamp, / O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call, / I

hear, I come presently, I understand you,"

- **Lines 99-106:** "Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird, / Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes, / Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines. / Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song, / Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe. / O liquid and free and tender! / O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer! / You only I hear—"
- **Lines 126-162:** "And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me, / The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three, / And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love. / From deep secluded recesses, / From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still, / Came the carol of the bird. / And the charm of the carol rapt me, / As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night, / And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird. / Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving, / In the day, in the night, to all, to each, / Sooner or later delicate death. / Prais'd be the fathomless universe, / For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious, / And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise! / For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death. / Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet, / Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome? / Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all, / I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly. / Approach strong deliveress, / When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee, / Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death. / From me to thee glad serenades, / Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee, / And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting, / And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night. / The night in silence under many a star, / The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know, / And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death, / And the body gratefully nestling close to thee. / Over the tree-tops I float thee a song, / Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide, / Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways, / I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death."
- **Lines 163-167:** "To the tally of my soul, / Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird, / With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night. / Loud in the pines and cedars dim, / Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,"
- **Lines 187-192:** "Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul, / Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song, / As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night, / Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy, / Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven, / As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,"
- **Lines 199-200:** "The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird, / And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,"
- **Line 205:** "bird "

NIGHT AND DARKNESS

Night, in this poem, symbolizes death, and a time of emotional or spiritual "darkness."

The way in which the speaker uses this symbol changes over the course of the poem. Near the beginning of the poem, the speaker represents night in traditional and negative ways. The speaker recalls the "western star," which symbolizes Lincoln, "falling" and being "lost" in the "black of the night." The speaker also describes the night as "black murk" that hides the star. In these moments of the poem, night symbolizes death, with an emphasis on loss and grief.

As the poem progresses, though, the speaker begins to warm to night, and eventually describes it as "welcome." These changes in the poem's treatment of night and darkness convey the speaker's growing understanding and acceptance of death as a part of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night, / I mourn'd,"
- **Line 8:** "O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!"
- **Line 9:** "O the black murk that hides the star!"
- **Line 11:** "O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul."
- **Line 34:** "great cloud darkening the land,"
- **Line 40:** "With dirges through the night,"
- **Lines 57-58:** "As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night, / As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,"
- **Lines 59-65:** "As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,) / As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,) / As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe, / As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night, / As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night, / As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb, / Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone."
- **Line 97:** "the welcome night and the stars,"
- **Lines 100-101:** "pour your chant from the bushes, /

Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines."

- **Lines 117-119:** "Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest, / Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail, / And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death."
- **Lines 123-125:** "I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not, / Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness, / To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still."
- **Lines 143-144:** "Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet, / Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?"
- **Line 155:** "The night in silence under many a star,"
- **Line 185:** "passing the night,"
- **Line 197:** "O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night."
- **Line 198:** "Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night,"
- **Lines 205-206:** "Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim."

THE SPRING

Throughout the poem, the speaker emphasizes the time of year: it is springtime, and specifically April, when flowers are just beginning to bloom, and new leaves are appearing on the trees. There's a literal reason for this: Lincoln was assassinated in April. But there's also symbolic meaning here: spring traditionally represents rebirth and new life after a period of darkness and winter. This new life can be physical (in the sense of plants and flowers reemerging) and also emotional, implying that after a period of spiritual winter or loss, people can again experience joy and hope.

Spring, the season of Easter, also suggests Christ's resurrection, implying that new life is possible *after* death and even that death can *enable* a different kind of life or rebirth. This symbolism implies that Lincoln's death, like Christ's, has a redemptive quality, and that the American people will somehow be reborn in the wake of this tragedy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring."
- **Line 4:** "Ever-returning spring,"
- **Lines 12-16:** "In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings, / Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green, / With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love, / With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard, / With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,"
- **Line 26:** "Over the breast of the spring,"
- **Lines 27-30:** "where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris, / Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass, / Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen, / Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,"
- **Lines 50-51:** "I cover you over with roses and early lilies, / But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,"
- **Lines 81-88:** "Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes, / With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright, / With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air, / With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific, / In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there, / With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows, / And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of chimneys, / And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning."
- **Lines 109-114:** "and the fields of spring, and the farmers preparing their crops, / In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests, / In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,) / Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children and women, / The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd, / And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor,"
- **Line 194:** "returning with spring."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

Imagery brings the poem's world to life, evoking both the joy of spring and the pain of grief through vivid, sensuous description.

The poem is set in a springtime world full of lilac bushes with "heart-shaped leaves of rich green." And even as Lincoln's funeral train makes its sad journey, it moves through landscapes full of "grass in the fields," "yellow-spear'd wheat," and "apple-tree blows of white and pink."

By sections 10 and 11, when the speaker imagines what he could bring to Lincoln's grave, his imagery expands to conjure "pictures" of the entire United States, including "sea-winds" off the coasts, "floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun," and "the gray smoke lucid and bright." This varied imagery conveys the richness of the land that the speaker celebrates, and by extension the vibrancy of the U.S. itself.

When the speaker moves away from the activity of the living

world to approach the singing bird in the swamp, the imagery of the poem changes. This "dim" place, so different from the active brightness of earlier landscapes, allows the speaker to meditate on death; he envisions "battle-corpses" and "the white skeletons of young men."

Section 16's final procession of imagery, in which familiar images like the starry "comrade lustrous with silver face in the night" and "the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim" return and combine, brings together celebration and grief. Both life and death, the poem's imagery finally suggests, are part of a vibrant whole.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 5
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Lines 12-17
- Lines 18-19
- Line 23
- Lines 26-32
- Lines 33-45
- Lines 49-52
- Line 55
- Line 57
- Line 59
- Lines 61-63
- Line 69
- Lines 74-75
- Lines 81-88
- Lines 90-98
- Line 99
- Lines 100-101
- Line 107
- Lines 109-118
- Lines 122-125
- Line 127
- Lines 129-130
- Line 136
- Line 142
- Line 143
- Lines 149-150
- Lines 153-154
- Lines 155-158
- Lines 159-161
- Lines 166-168
- Lines 171-179
- Lines 193-194
- Line 197
- Line 199
- Line 201
- Line 202
- Line 205
- Line 206

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton helps the speaker to conjure rich overflows of sensory experience. For example, when he first describes the blooming lilac, he observes that the bush is:

> [...] tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
> With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
> With every leaf a miracle."

Here, instead of conjunctions, the poem drives the description forward through the anaphora of "with." This combination of asyndeton and anaphora conveys the lilac's lush, overwhelming, abundant beauty.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses asyndeton to emphasize the depth of the nation's grief. For instance, section 6 is one long sentence, again strung together with that anaphoric "with." This continuous sentence mirrors what this passage describes: a long funeral train, observed by long trails of mourners.

Asyndeton also evokes the spacious variety of the United States. When the speaker imagines what "pictures" he could bring to Lincoln's tomb in section 11, his imagery of farmland and cities comes in another long list without conjunctions. This asyndeton conveys the breadth and vitality of the scenes he describes, and coincides with a moment of parataxis, in which each item in a list is given equal weight. Asyndeton and parataxis together create a sense of democracy and equality, as the speaker evenhandedly praises each aspect of the landscape.

Throughout the poem, asyndeton gives the poem an organic, living feeling, as if its lines are growing like living branches.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-15:** "Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green, / With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love, / With every leaf a miracle"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Solitary the thrush, / The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,"
- **Lines 23-24:** "Song of the bleeding throat, / Death's outlet song of life,"
- **Lines 26-31:** "Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities, / Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris, / Amid the grass in the fields each side of the

lanes, passing the endless grass, / Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen, / Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards, / Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,"

- **Lines 33-42:** "Coffin that passes through lanes and streets, / Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land, / With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black, / With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women standing, / With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night, / With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads, / With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces, / With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn, / With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin, / The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs"
- **Lines 52-53:** "Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes, / With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,"
- **Lines 67-68:** "I hear your notes, I hear your call, / I hear, I come presently, I understand you,"
- **Lines 74-75:** "Sea-winds blown from east and west, / Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea, till there on the prairies meeting,"
- **Lines 82-86:** "With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke lucid and bright, / With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air, / With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green leaves of the trees prolific, / In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there, / With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the sky, and shadows,"
- **Lines 93-97:** "Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty, / The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes, / The gentle soft-born measureless light, / The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon, / The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,"
- **Lines 100-101:** "Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes, / Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines."
- **Lines 110-113:** "In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests, / In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and the storms,) / Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children and women, / The many-moving sea-tides,"
- **Lines 117-118:** "Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest, / Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,"
- **Line 152:** "Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,"
- **Lines 185-193:** "Passing the visions, passing the night, / Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands, / Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul, / Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song, / As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling, flooding the night, / Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet again bursting with joy, / Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven, / As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses, / Passing,"

ANAPHORA

The poem's anaphora helps to create energy and momentum, to suggest overwhelming feeling, and to capture the vastness and beauty of the American landscape.

Just one vivid example is the anaphora of the cry "O" in the second section:

> O powerful western fallen star!
> O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
> O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
> O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
> O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

Here, the repeated "O" emphasizes the speaker's grief and awe at Lincoln's death, which he envisions as a huge celestial event, a star falling from the sky. That "O" links all these images together in one mournful cry, and propels the reader powerfully from line to line.

Elsewhere, anaphora on words like word "as"(when the speaker describes the night he communed with the western star) or the word "passing" (when the speaker leaves behind everything he has just seen) evokes the ongoing nature of the speaker's experience, creating a momentum that mirrors the steady sequence of events these sections describe.

Anaphora also communicates the diversity and richness of the American landscape. The repetition of the word "with" in section 11, for example, suggests that the speaker could go on describing the beauties of the countryside forever.

Ultimately, anaphora links disparate parts of the speaker's descriptions together into a larger "song," suggesting that the world he describes, too, is integrated and ongoing.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "O"
- **Line 8:** "O," "O"
- **Line 9:** "O," "O"
- **Line 10:** "O," "O"

- **Line 11:** “O”
- **Line 14:** “With,” “with”
- **Line 15:** “With”
- **Line 16:** “With”
- **Line 27:** “Amid”
- **Line 28:** “Amid,” “passing”
- **Line 29:** “Passing”
- **Line 30:** “Passing”
- **Line 35:** “With”
- **Line 36:** “With”
- **Line 37:** “With”
- **Line 38:** “With,” “with”
- **Line 39:** “With”
- **Line 40:** “With”
- **Line 41:** “With”
- **Line 43:** “With”
- **Line 57:** “As”
- **Line 58:** “As”
- **Line 59:** “As”
- **Line 60:** “As”
- **Line 61:** “As”
- **Line 62:** “As”
- **Line 63:** “As”
- **Line 64:** “As”
- **Line 67:** “I hear,” “I hear”
- **Line 68:** “I hear”
- **Line 72:** “And”
- **Line 73:** “And”
- **Line 75:** “Blown from,” “blown from”
- **Line 82:** “With”
- **Line 83:** “With”
- **Line 84:** “With”
- **Line 86:** “With,” “ with”
- **Line 87:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 88:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 89:** “Lo”
- **Line 93:** “Lo”
- **Line 94:** “The”
- **Line 95:** “The”
- **Line 96:** “The”
- **Line 97:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 99:** “Sing”
- **Line 100:** “Sing”
- **Line 102:** “Sing ”
- **Line 104:** “O”
- **Line 105:** “O,” “O”
- **Line 109:** “In”
- **Line 110:** “In”
- **Line 111:** “In”
- **Line 113:** “and”
- **Line 114:** “And”
- **Line 115:** “And”
- **Line 116:** “And”
- **Line 118:** “Appear’d,” “appear’d”
- **Line 119:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 121:** “And”
- **Line 122:** “And”
- **Line 126:** “And”
- **Line 128:** “And”
- **Line 129:** “From”
- **Line 130:** “From”
- **Line 132:** “And”
- **Line 134:** “And”
- **Line 137:** “In the ,” “in the ”
- **Line 153:** “And ,” “and”
- **Line 154:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 155:** “The”
- **Line 156:** “The”
- **Line 157:** “And ”
- **Line 158:** “And”
- **Line 159:** “Over”
- **Line 160:** “Over,” “over ”
- **Line 161:** “Over”
- **Line 174:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 175:** “And,” “and”
- **Line 176:** “And”
- **Line 181:** “They,” “they”
- **Line 182:** “The,” “the”
- **Line 183:** “And the,” “and the”
- **Line 184:** “And the”
- **Line 185:** “Passing,” “passing”
- **Line 186:** “Passing”
- **Line 187:** “Passing”
- **Line 193:** “Passing”
- **Line 201:** “With”
- **Line 202:** “With”
- **Line 203:** “for”
- **Line 204:** “For”

ALLUSION

The poem makes both literary and historical allusions, referring to biblical stories and to the American Civil War. These types of allusion work in opposite ways: biblical allusion expands Lincoln's story to a universal scale, while historical allusion places the poem right in Whitman's moment.

One of the clearer biblical allusions here is to the "western star," which brings to mind the Star of Bethlehem that heralded the birth of Christ. This star suggests that Lincoln was a Christ-like figure, and that his assassination, by extension, was similar to Christ’s crucifixion.

Later, the speaker describes the lilac bush, the star, and “thought of him I love” as a “trinity” (a group of three) that each spring will return to him. This is an allusion to the Holy Trinity, the Christian godhead composed of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. For this speaker, the lilacs, the star in the sky,

and his memories of Lincoln are as holy as the sacred trinity that unifies Christianity. These allusions are transcendent, making Lincoln's death bigger than itself.

But the speaker also makes more grounded allusions to Lincoln's funeral train and to the American Civil War. In the poem's fifth and sixth sections, the "coffin" is a metonym for the train that carried Lincoln's body across the country—a train that Whitman's first readers would certainly have heard of, and perhaps saw themselves. And when the speaker describes "the South and the North," he refers to the Confederacy and the Union, the opposing sides of the American Civil War. He conjures the war more directly with a vision of soldiers who have died in battle. For modern readers, these allusions need some interpretation, but the poem's first audience would have instantly known what Whitman was referring to.

The poem's two flavors of allusion create the sense that the poem is dealing both with the universal and the specific, finding a connection between the pain and struggle of that particular moment in history and the deep truths that stay constant across time.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the great star"
- **Line 4:** "trinity"
- **Line 5:** "star in the west"
- **Line 7:** "O powerful western fallen star!"
- **Line 9:** "O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!"
- **Lines 31-32:** "Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave, / Night and day journeys a coffin."
- **Line 33:** "Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,"
- **Line 55:** "O western orb sailing the heaven,"
- **Lines 64-65:** "as where you sad orb, / Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone."
- **Line 91:** "the South and the North in the light"
- **Lines 171-179:** "I saw askant the armies, / I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags, / Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw them, / And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody, / And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,) / And the staffs all splinter'd and broken. / I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them, / And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them, / I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The speaker asks rhetorical questions at three key moments. First, in sections 10 and 11, the speaker asks rhetorically how he can sing an appropriate elegy for Lincoln, what "perfume" he could bring to the tomb, and what "pictures" he could decorate it with.

These questions show the speaker wondering how to grieve and how to appropriately honor such a leader—but they also invite the reader into the speaker's grief, asking them to consider what it truly means to honor someone who has died. When he answers his own questions, offering "sea-winds" for perfume and "pictures" of American life for decoration, he suggests that the best way to truly grieve Lincoln is through images of the United States itself, in all of its rich diversity.

Later, addressing death, the speaker again uses a rhetorical question. Here, he asks death, personified as a "Dark mother": "Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?" Again, the speaker answers his own question, saying that *he* will sing death a song of praise. His song uses images much like those with which he imagined decorating Lincoln's tomb: "life and the fields," the ocean, and cities full of people.

This second rhetorical question, and the speaker's answer to it, creates a parallel between the speaker's questions about how to honor Lincoln's death, and how to honor death itself. This shift in the nature of the questioning shows how the speaker has changed: processing Lincoln's death allows him to see death as a part of life, a thing to be respected and even praised.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 71-73:** "O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved? / And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone? / And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?"
- **Lines 78-80:** "O what shall I hang on the chamber walls? / And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls, / To adorn the burial-house of him I love?"
- **Lines 143-144:** "Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet, / Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification helps the speaker to develop his themes of connection and acceptance, allowing him to address nature—and even death itself—as a friend.

Early in the poem, the speaker personifies a song thrush as both a "hermit," or reclusive religious person, and as a "dear brother." Throughout, the speaker suggests that the bird's song is also a "human" song, a "carol of death" that he and the bird can share. The bird can even be read as an image of the speaker himself, and signifies his feeling of deep connection to the natural world.

The speaker also personifies the western star, giving it a face "full [...] of woe," and suggesting that the star came to warn him of Lincoln's death. This sad, falling star might be read as a symbol of Lincoln himself, again underlining the speaker's sense that nature both mirrors humans and speaks to them.

As the poem progresses, and the speaker meditates more

deeply on death, he personifies the "knowledge" and "thought" of death, imagining the two walking beside him as "comrades," as though he is holding their hands. This personification suggests that the speaker has come to a different understanding and acceptance of death. Rather than seeing it as a negative thing or something to be feared, he regards death as a friend and an equal.

Finally, the speaker personifies death itself as a "Dark mother." This personification again suggests that death isn't something frightening or evil, but a necessary part of life—and even a loving one.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "O moody, tearful night!"
- **Line 10:** "O cruel hands that hold me powerless," "O helpless soul of me!"
- **Line 19:** "A shy and hidden bird"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Solitary the thrush, / The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,"
- **Line 24:** "dear brother"
- **Line 48:** "O sane and sacred death."
- **Lines 55-60:** "O western orb sailing the heaven, / Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd, / As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night, / As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night, / As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,) / As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,)"
- **Line 61:** "I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,"
- **Lines 64-65:** "As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb, / Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone."
- **Lines 66-67:** "Sing on there in the swamp, / O singer bashful and tender,"
- **Line 70:** "The star my departing comrade holds and detains me."
- **Lines 102-103:** "Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song, / Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe."
- **Lines 120-122:** "Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, / And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, / And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,"
- **Lines 126-128:** "And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me, / The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three, / And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love."
- **Line 133:** "As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,"
- **Line 142:** "the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death."
- **Line 143:** "Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,"
- **Line 147:** "Approach strong deliveress,"
- **Line 156:** "he husky whispering wave whose voice I know,"
- **Line 168:** "And I with my comrades there in the night."
- **Line 186:** "the hold of my comrades' hands,"
- **Line 187:** "the hermit bird"
- **Line 197:** "O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night."

APOSTROPHE

The poem's first notable moment of apostrophe appears in the second section, when the speaker addresses not just the "fallen star," but the "shades of night" that covered it, his own misery, and his own helplessness. These dramatic, urgent direct addresses, driven by the anaphoric repetition of "O," convey the speaker's grief, confusion, and despair. It's as if he's crying out for help, but has only his own sadness to speak to.

But as he begins to find consolation in nature, apostrophe reflects his growing connection with the world around him. First, he speaks directly to the "thrush," seeing it as a "dearest brother" and fellow-mourner, whose song he can share. And later, he even addresses Lincoln's body, saying "Here, coffin [...] I give you my sprig of lilac." Here, he reaches past the borders of death, sharing the comfort he's found in the ever-returning flowers of spring.

And indeed, he goes on to speak directly to death itself: "*Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving.*" The speaker's journey through grief has at last allowed him to see death as—strangely—a living thing, a friend he can speak to and even praise.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-11:** "O powerful western fallen star! / O shades of night—O moody, tearful night! / O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star! / O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me! / O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul."
- **Lines 24-25:** "(for well dear brother I know, / If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)"
- **Lines 44-45:** "Here, coffin that slowly passes, / I give you my sprig of lilac."
- **Lines 46-54:** "(Nor for you, for one alone, / Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring, / For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred death. / All over bouquets of roses, / O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies, / But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first, / Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes, / With loaded arms I

come, pouring for you, / For you and the coffins all of you O death.)"

- **Lines 55-65:** "O western orb sailing the heaven, / Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk'd, / As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night, / As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night, / As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all look'd on,) / As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept me from sleep,) / As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe, / As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night, / As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward black of the night, / As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb, / Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone."
- **Lines 66-68:** "Sing on there in the swamp, / O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call, / I hear, I come presently, I understand you,"
- **Lines 99-105:** "Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird, / Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes, / Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines. / Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song, / Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe. / O liquid and free and tender! / O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!"
- **Lines 135-138:** "Come lovely and soothing death, / Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving, / In the day, in the night, to all, to each, / Sooner or later delicate death."
- **Lines 143-146:** "Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet, / Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome? / Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all, / I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly."
- **Lines 147-150:** "Approach strong deliveress, / When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead, / Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee, / Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death."
- **Lines 151-162:** "From me to thee glad serenades, / Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee, / And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting, / And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night. / The night in silence under many a star, / The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know, / And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death, / And the body gratefully nestling close to thee. / Over the tree-tops I float thee a song, / Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide, / Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways, / I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death."
- **Lines 195-197:** "I cease from my song for thee, / From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee, / O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night."

REPETITION

The poem's frequent, cyclical repetitions create feelings of connection and musicality that mirror the poem's interest in the circle of life—and how humans can sing in the face of death.

Every single section of the poem uses polyptoton, diacope, anaphora, or all three. (In fact, there's so much anaphora that we've provided a dedicated entry on this device—see the Anaphora section for more.)

For example, in the very first section of the poem, the speaker says that he "mourn'd" (in the past tense) and "shall mourn" (the future) with every spring. Similarly, he tells the singing bird that the star (which symbolizes Lincoln) "detain'd" him, and then that it still "detains" him. These moments of polyptoton convey the depth of the speaker's pain. He grieved in the past, grieves in the present, and will grieve in the future—despite the acceptance of death that he comes to by the poem's end.

Meanwhile, diacope on words like "delicate," or on whole phrases like "heart-shaped leaves of rich green," reflects the speaker's deep sensory immersion in the life around him—and gestures to the way that those same "heart-shaped leaves of rich green" always return, putting him in mind of resurrection and immortality.

Some of the poem's most-repeated words, like "lilac," "night," "song," and "star," are also its most powerful images. Repetition draws the reader's imagination back to these images, and to the significance the speaker finds in them as he begins to come to terms with death as an intrinsic part of life.

Last but far from least, these myriad rhythmic repetitions give the poem musicality—a melodiousness that suggests that this poem itself is the "chant" the speaker describes, celebrating both life and death.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "lilacs"
- **Line 2:** "star," "western," "night"
- **Line 3:** "I mourn'd," "shall mourn," "ever-returning," "spring"
- **Line 4:** "Ever-returning," " spring"
- **Line 5:** "Lilac," "star," "west"
- **Line 7:** "O," "western," "star"
- **Line 8:** "O," "night," "night"
- **Line 9:** "O," "star," "star"
- **Line 10:** "O," "soul"
- **Line 11:** "O," "soul"

- **Line 12:** “In the dooryard”
- **Line 13:** “lilac-bush,” “heart-shaped leaves of rich green”
- **Line 14:** “With,” “blossom,” “delicate”
- **Line 15:** “With,” “bush,” “in the dooryard”
- **Line 16:** “With,” “delicate,” “blossoms,” “heart-shaped leaves of rich green”
- **Line 19:** “song”
- **Line 22:** “song”
- **Line 23:** “Song”
- **Line 24:** “song”
- **Line 28:** “grass,” “grass”
- **Line 33:** “through”
- **Line 34:** “Through,” “night”
- **Line 35:** “With”
- **Line 36:** “With”
- **Line 37:** “With”
- **Line 38:** “With”
- **Line 39:** “With”
- **Line 40:** “With,” “night”
- **Line 41:** “With”
- **Line 43:** “tolling tolling”
- **Line 47:** “all”
- **Line 48:** “death”
- **Line 49:** “All”
- **Line 50:** “O death”
- **Line 52:** “I break,” “I break”
- **Line 53:** “for you”
- **Line 54:** “For you,” “O death”
- **Line 55:** “orb”
- **Line 56:** “you,” “I walk’d”
- **Line 57:** “As,” “I walk’d,” “night”
- **Line 58:** “As,” “you,” “you,” “night,” “night”
- **Line 59:** “As,” “you”
- **Line 60:** “As,” “night”
- **Line 61:** “As,” “night,” “you”
- **Line 62:** “As,” “night”
- **Line 63:** “As,” “you,” “night”
- **Line 64:** “As,” “you,” “orb”
- **Line 65:** “night”
- **Line 67:** “I hear,” “I hear”
- **Line 68:** “I hear”
- **Line 69:** “ star ,” “detain’d me”
- **Line 70:** “star ,” “detains me”
- **Line 71:** “how,” “ shall I ,” “I loved”
- **Line 72:** “how shall I”
- **Line 73:** “shall,” “perfume,” “grave of him,” “I love”
- **Line 74:** “blown”
- **Line 75:** “Blown,” “sea,” “blown,” “sea”
- **Line 76:** “These,” “these”
- **Line 77:** “perfume,” “grave of him I love”
- **Line 78:** “what shall,” “I hang on the,” “walls”
- **Line 79:** “what shall,” “I hang on the,” “walls”
- **Line 80:** “him I love”
- **Line 88:** “work,” “work”
- **Line 89:** “land”
- **Line 91:** “land”
- **Line 96:** “all”
- **Line 98:** “all”
- **Line 99:** “Sing on,” “sing on ”
- **Line 100:** “Sing”
- **Line 102:** “Sing on,” “song”
- **Line 103:** “song”
- **Line 106:** “yet”
- **Line 107:** “Yet”
- **Line 116:** “throbbings throbb’d”
- **Line 117:** “all,” “all”
- **Line 118:** “Appear’d,” “appear’d”
- **Line 119:** “death,” “death”
- **Line 120:** “death,” “walking,” “side of me”
- **Line 121:** “death,” “walking,” “side of me”
- **Line 122:** “companions,” “companions”
- **Line 125:** “cedars and ghostly pines so still”
- **Line 127:** “bird,” “comrades”
- **Line 128:** “carol”
- **Line 130:** “cedars and the ghostly pines so still”
- **Line 131:** “carol”
- **Line 132:** “carol”
- **Line 133:** “comrades”
- **Line 134:** “bird”
- **Line 135:** “death”
- **Line 136:** “arriving,” “arriving”
- **Line 138:** “death”
- **Line 139:** “Prais’d”
- **Line 141:** “love,” “love,” “praise,” “praise,” “praise”
- **Line 142:** “death”
- **Line 144:** “chanted,” “chant”
- **Line 145:** “chant”
- **Line 146:** “come,” “come ”
- **Line 148:** “When,” “when”
- **Line 150:** “O death”
- **Line 154:** “night”
- **Line 155:** “night”
- **Line 159:** “I float”
- **Line 162:** “I float,” “O death”
- **Line 164:** “Loud”
- **Line 165:** “night”
- **Line 166:** “Loud”
- **Line 168:** “night”
- **Line 171:** “I saw”
- **Line 172:** “I saw”
- **Line 173:** “I saw”
- **Line 177:** “I saw”
- **Line 178:** “I saw”
- **Line 179:** “I saw,” “debris,” “debris”
- **Line 180:** “I saw”
- **Line 181:** “suffer’d”

- **Line 182:** “suffer’d,” “suffer’d”
- **Line 183:** “suffer’d”
- **Line 184:** “suffer’d”
- **Line 185:** “night”
- **Line 187:** “song ,” “song”
- **Line 188:** “song,” “song,” “song”
- **Line 189:** “night”
- **Line 190:** “warning,” “warning”
- **Line 193:** “I leave thee,” “lilac”
- **Line 194:** “I leave thee”
- **Line 195:** “thee”
- **Line 196:** “thee ,” “west,” “west,” “thee”
- **Line 197:** “comrade,” “night”
- **Line 198:** “night”
- **Line 199:** “chant,” “bird”
- **Line 200:** “chant,” “soul”
- **Line 201:** “star”
- **Line 202:** “holders holding,” “bird”
- **Line 203:** “Comrades”
- **Line 205:** “Lilac,” “star ,” “bird,” “soul”

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition evokes the poem's contrasts between the personal and the collective, life and death, and pain and joy.

For example, after describing the “processions” of people coming out to greet the funeral train, the speaker turns to his own, quieter personal mourning, offering Lincoln's coffin a “sprig of lilac.” Similarly, the speaker describes leaving “the infinite separate houses” of other Americans to walk alone into the swamp, with only the “knowledge” and “thought” of death close to him.

These juxtapositions of the group with the individual suggest that both public and private mourning play a part in the speaker's encounter with death. To truly come to terms with this loss, the speaker must move away from the crowds to meditate on death by himself, in the natural world. At the same time, this juxtaposition asks the reader to consider the private experiences of *everyone* in the “sea of faces” at the funeral train. Every crowd is made of individuals, and everyone must come to terms with death in their own way. Sharing grief, the speaker suggests, is an important part of understanding one's individual grief.

The poem also juxtaposes imagery of daytime, spring growth, and human activity with the shadows, quiet, and seclusion of the swamp. The speaker's scenes of an American springtime evoke their bright vitality; his time in the swamp is marked by the darkness of "dusk" among “ghostly” trees. This juxtaposition emphasizes the difference between life and death. But the speaker goes on to *combine* these disparate qualities, singing a song to death that conjures fields, trees, and the ocean.

The poem’s juxtapositions, then, illustrate the speaker's struggle with his own grief in the face of springtime beauty. By the poem’s ending, as these juxtapositions begin to resolve, the poem implies that the speaker too has come to some kind of resolution, celebrating death's role in a vibrant living world.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 33-45:** “Coffin that passes through lanes and streets, / Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land, / With the pomp of the inloop’d flags with the cities draped in black, / With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil’d women standing, / With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night, / With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads, / With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces, / With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn, / With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour’d around the coffin, / The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these you journey, / With the tolling tolling bells’ perpetual clang, / Here, coffin that slowly passes, / I give you my sprig of lilac.”
- **Lines 89-98:** “Lo, body and soul—this land, / My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and hurrying tides, and the ships, / The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the light, Ohio’s shores and flashing Missouri, / And ever the far-spreading prairies cover’d with grass and corn. / Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty, / The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes, / The gentle soft-born measureless light, / The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill’d noon, / The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars, / Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.”
- **Lines 99-101:** “Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird, / Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes, / Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.”
- **Lines 108-125:** “Now while I sat in the day and look’d forth, / In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring, and the farmers preparing their crops, / In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and forests, / In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb’d winds and the storms,) / Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and the voices of children and women, / The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail’d, / And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all busy with labor, / And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each with its meals and minutia of daily usages, / And the streets how their throbbings throbb’d, and the cities pent—lo, then and there, / Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest, / Appear’d the cloud, appear’d the long black trail, / And I

knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death. / Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, / And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, / And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions, / I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not, / Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness, / To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still."

- **Lines 129-131:** "From deep secluded recesses, / From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still, / Came the carol of the bird."
- **Lines 153-156:** "And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting, / And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night. / The night in silence under many a star, / The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,"
- **Lines 159-162:** "Over the tree-tops I float thee a song, / Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide, / Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways, / I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death."

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors create layers of rich, interconnected meaning. For example, the "harsh surrounding cloud" that won't release the speaker's soul in section 2 turns grief into a natural phenomenon like weather—and connects it to the "black murk" that he uses as a metaphor for death itself. These metaphors foreshadow the speaker's eventual realization: death and grief, though agonizing, are as much a part of the world as rain or night.

Another important metaphor appears in section 5. Describing the journey of the funeral train, the speaker conjures an image of wheat growing by the side of the tracks. This wheat has thrown off its husk, which the speaker calls a "shroud": in other words, it's coming back to life after a period of wintery death. The image suggests that Lincoln's death has been redemptive and even Christlike, allowing for some mysterious rebirth.

Later, when the speaker sees crowds of mourners as a "sea of faces," his oceanic metaphor makes each individual part of a larger whole. Later, he'll describe death itself as an "ocean." In both grief and death, this metaphor suggests, people become part of a mighty, beautiful, and sometimes frightening whole.

These are only some of the poem's rich metaphors—but throughout, metaphor connects humanity to nature, making emotion and personality natural phenomena just like growing grain or gathering clouds.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "black murk"
- **Line 10:** "O cruel hands that hold me powerless"
- **Line 11:** "O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul"
- **Line 26:** "the breast of the spring"
- **Line 29:** "the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen"
- **Line 38:** "the silent sea of faces"
- **Line 55:** "sailing the heaven"
- **Line 85:** "the breast of the river"
- **Line 116:** "the streets how their throbbings throbb'd"
- **Lines 117-118:** "Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest, / Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,"
- **Lines 120-125:** "Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, / And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, / And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions, / I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not, / Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness, / To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still."
- **Line 149:** "Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee"
- **Line 150:** "Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death."

ALLITERATION

The poem's many alliterative moments create music, emphasis, and meaning. (In fact, there's so much alliteration in the poem that we've only marked a sample—there's more to find!)

For example, in section 1, lilting /l/ sounds connect the words "lilacs," "last" and "love." This alliteration, which is emphasized even more by the consonance of the /l/ sound in the middle of "lilacs," gently links the beauty of the spring flowers with the speaker's experience of loss, and his memories of Lincoln.

Similarly, hard /c/ sounds connect the words "carrying," "corpse," and "coffin." After the soft, beautiful imagery of springtime in section 5, this harsher alliteration emphasizes the cruel reality of Lincoln's death.

Later, when the speaker addresses death directly for the first time in the poem's seventh section, he includes multiple moments of alliteration: /l/ sounds connect "lilies," "lilacs," and "loaded," while /b/ sounds recur in "blossoms," "branches," "bouquets," "break" and "bushes," and /s/ sounds in "song," "sane," and "sacred." This musical alliteration turns the speaker's poem into the very "chant" he describes.

The poem also uses lots of sibilant alliteration, most prominently when the speaker describes the secluded swamp where the thrush sings. When the speaker first describes this singing bird in detail in the poem's fourth section, sibilant sounds predominate, in "swamp," "secluded," "shy," "song," "solitary," "settlements," "sings," "song," "sing," and "surely." These

hushed sounds help to make the swamp feel quiet and secluded, set apart from the living world.

Importantly, these sibilant sounds reappear when the speaker conjures terrible images of the war dead. In this section, the sibilant /s/ and /sh/ sounds in “smoke,” “shreds,” “staffs,” “silence," “splinter’d,” "slain," and "soldiers" cast a ghostly hush over the scene.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “lilacs,” “last”
- **Line 5:** “Lilac”
- **Line 6:** “love”
- **Line 10:** “hands,” “helpless”
- **Line 11:** “harsh”
- **Line 18:** “swamp,” “secluded”
- **Line 19:** “shy,” “song”
- **Line 20:** “Solitary”
- **Line 21:** “settlements”
- **Line 22:** “Sings,” “song”
- **Line 23:** “Song”
- **Line 24:** “song”
- **Line 25:** “sing,” “surely ”
- **Line 31:** “Carrying,” “corpse”
- **Line 32:** “coffin”
- **Line 47:** “Blossoms,” “branches”
- **Line 48:** “song ,” “sane,” “sacred”
- **Line 49:** “bouquets”
- **Line 50:** “lilies”
- **Line 51:** “lilac”
- **Line 52:** “break,” “break,” “bushes”
- **Line 53:** “loaded”
- **Line 174:** “smoke”
- **Line 175:** “shreds,” “staffs,” “silence”
- **Line 176:** “staffs,” “splinter’d”
- **Line 179:** “slain,” “soldiers”

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance connects words to each other, creating both meaning and music. The Alliteration section of this guide goes into more detail on how that works; meanwhile, we've marked up examples in the first few sections of the poem here.

One powerful example comes in section 3, where strong, lilting /l/ consonance evokes the delicate beauty of the "lilac" and its "blossom," with its "delicate" flowers. This consonance even joins forces with the assonance of "love" and "leaf" to make it seem as if the lilac bush fills up the speaker's whole attention, overwhelming him with loveliness.

A different flavor of consonance appears in section 2, where the hard /k/ sounds at the end of “black” and “murk” emphasize the darkness that has covered the "star," and the pain of Lincoln's death.

And in section 1, /r/ consonance builds strong connections between "spring" and the poignant "trinity" it will "bring" to the speaker's mind from now on.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “great,” “star”
- **Line 3:** “ever,” “returning,” “spring”
- **Line 4:** “Ever,” “returning,” “spring,” “trinity,” “sure,” “bring”
- **Line 5:** “perennial,” “drooping,” “star”
- **Line 7:** “powerful,” “western,” “star”
- **Line 9:** “black murk”
- **Line 13:** “lilac,” “tall”
- **Line 14:** “blossom,” “delicate”
- **Line 15:** “miracle”
- **Line 16:** “delicate,” “color’d,” “blossoms”
- **Line 72:** “song,” “large sweet soul”
- **Line 73:** “perfume,” “grave”

ASSONANCE

The poem's assonance works a lot like its alliteration and consonance, giving the poem music and meaning; we go into more depth about how that works in the Alliteration section. So much assonance appears in this poem that we've only marked it in the first few sections here—but already, the reader can see how it works.

One powerful example is the /ow/ sound of "surrounding cloud," which sounds just as enveloping and overwhelming as the cloud of grief it describes. Similarly, the repeated /ee/ in "leaves of rich green" suggests those leaves' vibrancy and liveliness: it's as if the speaker is marveling over how greenness is in the leaves' very nature.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “bloom’d”
- **Line 2:** “droop’d,” “sky,” “night”
- **Line 4:** “spring,” “bring”
- **Line 5:** “blooming,” “drooping”
- **Line 11:** “surrounding,” “cloud”
- **Line 13:** “leaves,” “green”
- **Line 16:** “leaves,” “green”
- **Line 33:** “lanes”
- **Line 34:** “day,” “great”
- **Line 35:** “draped”
- **Line 36:** “States,” “crape-veil’d”
- **Line 42:** “dim-lit”
- **Line 43:** “tolling tolling”
- **Line 44:** “slowly”
- **Line 45:** “give,” “sprig”

VOCABULARY

Bloom'd (Line 1) - "Bloom'd" is an archaic (that is, old-fashioned) spelling of "bloomed." Whitman uses similar spellings for past-tense verbs throughout the poem ("mourn'd" for "mourned," "droop'd" for "drooped," etc.)

Trinity (Line 4) - A trinity is a group of three. The word often refers to the Christian Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Perennial (Line 5) - Perpetual, everlasting. If the lilac is "perennial," it will keep blooming, over and over, every spring.

Shades (Line 8) - The gathering shadows or darkness of evening.

Palings (Line 12) - "Palings" is a word for a "paling fence," also known as a picket fence.

Sprig (Line 17, Line 45, Line 52) - A little branch of leaves and flowers.

Recesses (Line 18, Line 100, Line 129, Line 192) - Secluded, remote, or hard-to-see crannies.

Warbling (Line 19, Line 71, Line 102) - To sing or whistle. Most often used to describe birdsong.

Hermit (Line 21, Line 187) - A religious person who lives in isolation in order to dedicate themselves to their spiritual life and practice.

Yellow-spear'd (Line 29) - An image of the way the yellow top of growing wheat resembles the sharp tip of a spear.

Shroud (Line 29) - A funeral cloth, used to cover a body—here used metaphorically to describe wheat shedding its husk as it grows.

Crape-veil'd (Line 36) - The word "crape-veil'd" refers to traditional mourning clothing. Mourners in Whitman's time would often dress in black crape (a type of delicate fabric), with a black "veil" or face covering for women.

Dirges (Line 40, Line 41) - Elegies or songs of mourning.

Shuddering (Line 42) - To shake or tremble, often with fear or dread.

Sane (Line 48) - When the speaker refers to death as "sane," he means that death has sound judgment and is reasonable, not cruel or capricious.

Copious (Line 52) - Plentiful and abundant.

Orb (Line 55, Line 64) - A globe or sphere. The word is often used to refer to planets or stars.

Woe (Line 61, Line 103, Line 201) - Deep sadness.

Netherward (Line 63) - Since "nether" means the lower area of something, when the speaker says that the star is lost in the "netherward" part of the night, he means that it falls to the lowest part of the sky and past the horizon.

Comrade (Line 70, Line 127, Line 133, Line 168, Line 183, Line 186, Line 203) - A friend or companion, with a connotation of kinship and equality.

Chamber (Line 78) - A private room. In the poem, the speaker imagines Lincoln's tomb as a kind of "house" with an bedroom "chamber."

Adorn (Line 80) - To decorate something or make it more beautiful.

Fourth-month eve (Line 82) - The word "Fourth-month" refers to the month of April, when Lincoln was assassinated. The word "eve" is an archaic form of evening. Together, the phrase refers to an April evening.

Lo (Line 89, Line 93) - "Lo" is an archaic word, frequently used in Biblical expressions. It means, essentially "look," and is used to call attention to something, often something miraculous or beautiful.

Ample (Line 91) - Plentiful or spacious; more than enough.

Haughty (Line 93) - Proud or arrogant.

Measureless (Line 95) - Beyond measure, infinite.

Reedy (Line 102) - Sounding like a reed instrument (such as a flute).

Unconscious (Line 110) - Unaware or unknown.

Aerial (Line 111) - To do with the air; high or lofty.

Perturb'd (Line 111) - Disturbed or agitated.

Swift (Line 112) - A type of bird, similar to a swallow.

Throbbings (Line 116) - Rhythmic pulsings, like a heartbeat.

Receiving (Line 123) - Welcoming or receptive.

Carol (Line 128, Line 131, Line 132, Line 162) - A song or hymn of celebration.

Undulate (Line 136) - To move with a continuous rising and falling movement, like a wave.

Fathomless (Line 139) - Infinite or beyond human comprehension. The depth of water is measured in fathoms, so this word suggests that the universe's awesome depth is like the sea's.

Cool-enfolding (Line 142) - When the speaker says that death is "cool-enfolding," he personifies death, imagining that death has arms that would "enfold" or embrace someone—but with chilly arms.

Saluting (Line 152) - To address someone with respect and honor.

Husky (Line 156) - Slightly hoarse.

Myriad (Line 160) - A huge number; the speaker suggests that the fields are uncountable.

Teeming wharves (Line 161) - A wharf is a dock for loading and unloading boats—and a "teeming" wharf is one that is

overflowing with people.

Askant (Line 171) - To look at something "askant" means to see it from the side, rather than straight on.

Hither and yon (Line 174) - Back and forth. ("Hither" and "yon" are archaic words meaning "nearby" and "far away").

Tallying chant (Line 200) - If something "tallies," it corresponds with something else. A "chant" is a rhythmic song. The speaker means that his soul sings along with the bird; they perform the same "chant" together.

Dusk and dim (Line 206) - "Dusk" refers to evening, when night and darkness start to fall. "Dim" means half-lit. The speaker uses the words together to describe the shadowy darkness under the cedars and pines in the evening.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is written in the form of a pastoral elegy: a traditional poem of mourning, often for a public figure. An elegy becomes "pastoral" when it's set in nature, focusing on life in the countryside; "pastoral" literally means "relating to shepherds." In a traditional pastoral elegy, the speaker begins by grieving the person who has died, but eventually comes around to a deeper acceptance of death, comforted by the renewal of nature.

Whitman's poem follows this form in several ways. The poem elegizes Lincoln and mourns his death. While the speaker suffers over the loss of Lincoln, he ultimately comes to see death as a natural part of life, and finds hope in the rebirth of lilacs in the springtime.

But the poem also diverges from the pastoral elegy form in important ways. Traditionally, a pastoral elegy focuses on the person who has died. Yet the speaker of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" foregrounds his *personal* experience of grief, and by extension the individual experiences of all the Americans who are mourning. This change makes the form feel more democratic, suggesting that the common person's grief is just as meaningful as the tragedy of the fallen hero.

The poem is made out of 16 sections of different lengths and structures, in which the speaker cycles through repeating, evolving images of springtime, lilacs, Lincoln's funeral train, a singing bird, night, and a western star that "fell" in the night sky. In the poem's closing section, the speaker returns to all of these images and ties them together, depicting them as "retrievements," meaningful memories that he (and his poem's readers) can carry with them. Over the course of this poem, the speaker gradually develops a new acceptance of life and death, incorporating all the images that have touched him into a larger understanding.

METER

Whitman wanted to create a distinctly American poetry that would celebrate democratic values. He wanted his poems to feel accessible and immediate, and to use the rhythms of everyday speech. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" thus uses free verse, which means it has no set meter, or even a regular line length: some lines are as short as 6 syllables, and others over 20 syllables long, and those lines vary widely in their stresses and sounds.

Without meter, the poem has a natural, organic quality, like the landscapes and lilac bush that the speaker describes. This free-flowing sound fits right in with the poem's celebration of springtime lushness and vitality. The poem's varied lines also reflect the variety in the landscapes the speaker describes all across the U.S., from the east and west coasts to the prairies in the middle of the country.

From the short, quiet lines when the speaker describes the singing bird, to the expansive, long lines when he depicts the life of surrounding fields and farmland, the poem's changing rhythm reflects the "ever-altering" song of life and death that the speaker describes.

RHYME SCHEME

Written in free verse, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" has no set rhyme scheme. This lack of rhyme adds to the poem's natural, immediate feeling. In abandoning poetic conventions like rhyme and meter, Whitman tried to move away from older European traditions, creating a more open and freer style that could speak directly to American experience.

But while there's no rhyme here, the poem is far from ordinary speech! Throughout, the poem uses a rich variety of sound devices, including alliteration, assonance, and consonance (for more about each of these, see the Poetic Devices section of this guide).

It also includes several moments of internal rhyme, including in "spring" and "bring" in the opening section (which also create rhymes at the line endings of lines 3 and 4) and "morn" and "born" in section 12. These internal rhymes and sound effects lift the poem out of ordinary speech into a kind of music, so that the poem becomes a record of the "song" of grief and celebration that he hears emerging from the singing bird and his own soul.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" remains anonymous and ungendered throughout the poem. Most readers, though, interpret the speaker as Whitman himself.

Whitman wrote about his admiration for Lincoln, and of his perception of "a deep latent sadness" in the President's face.

The image of the star in the poem, with its face full of "woe" or deep sadness, fits right in with this impression. Whitman also wrote of having seen the planet Venus, which he described as a "western star," just weeks before Lincoln's assassination. Whitman's own experiences and his personal love and admiration for the President seem likely to have inspired this poem.

The speaker also identifies with the singing bird, and with the bird's "song." This connection draws on a long tradition linking poetry and music, especially birdsong; poets are often spoken of as singers or songbirds. This speaker's "song" is the poem itself.

At the same time, it's important that the speaker never directly identifies himself. In his poetry, Whitman was interested in exploring the meaning of the individual, and how the "I" connects to the "we." The speaker of the poem is both individual and expansive: he's able to imagine all the country's mourners, and to channel their grief into this poem. The speaker, then, can be understood as a representation of Whitman, but also as a representation of all grieving Americans.

One thing is certain about this speaker: he's a passionate, reflective, and soulful character, with an ability to see life and death as part of a grand and beautiful pattern.

SETTING

In the most literal sense, the poem is set in 1865, after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. Whitman was in Washington, D.C. at the time, having worked as a military nurse there during the American Civil War. The poem's imagery of early spring, including the blooming lilacs, and the swamp where the bird sings, with its cedars and pine trees, is clearly inspired by the natural landscape of the U.S. east coast.

Yet the poem also travels beyond this setting, conjuring landscapes across the United States as it follows the cross-country route of Lincoln's funeral train. These expansive vistas suggest that the setting of the poem is actually the entire United States, as the speaker expresses a whole country's grief.

The speaker also uses the different settings of the poem to explore his themes. For instance, the singing bird's shadowy swamp contrasts with the vivid springtime of the lilac bush and the fields and farms. As the speaker moves back and forth between these settings, he comes to a deeper understanding of the intimate relationship between life and death. In encompassing landscapes of darkness and light, swamp and field, the poem ultimately praises both sides of existence as necessary parts of the larger "miracle" of the world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

This poem first appeared in the *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, an 1865 poetry collection which dealt with Whitman's experiences as a nurse during the American Civil War. Whitman revised and expanded the book after Lincoln's assassination, adding a group of elegiac poems including "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

Whitman wanted to create a new and distinctly American kind of poetry. He discarded meter and rhyme scheme, seeking a poetics closer to ordinary speech and expansive enough to include a range of American experiences. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" reflects these aspects of Whitman's writing, using free verse to call attention to ordinary, humble aspects of daily life in the United States.

But the poem also draws on the old tradition of the pastoral elegy in its images of the beauty of springtime and its sense of Lincoln as a kind of shepherd, guiding and protecting the American people even after death. By writing the poem in this form, Whitman brought his elegy into conversation with other poets who wrote famous pastoral elegies, especially Virgil, Milton, and Shelley.

Whitman's poetry and style had a profound impact on American poetry, and he is considered one of the most important American poets of the 19th century. To give just one example, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is often cited as an influence on T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which borrows Whitman's imagery of lilacs and a "hermit-thrush." "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" has also more than once been set to music—notably by the Black composer George T. Walker, Jr., whose *Lilacs* won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Music.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Whitman wrote "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" in the summer of 1865. President Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated in April, and the nation was deep in mourning. The poem alludes to specific historical details of this era, including Lincoln's funeral train, which carried the president's body from Washington, D.C. to his hometown, Springfield, Illinois, where he was buried. The train made numerous stops along the way so that Americans across the country could pay their respects.

The larger historical context of the poem and of Lincoln's assassination is that of the American Civil War, which ended just a few days before Lincoln died. Whitman worked as a nurse during the war, and the poem alludes to its horrors multiple times, particularly when the speaker describes his terrible vision of soldiers who have died in battle.

This poem thus emerges from a time of profound national turmoil. Although the Civil War had ended, Lincoln's death was

another appalling act of violence from which the country would need to recover. (Lincoln was also the first American president to be assassinated, making his death even more shocking.) This historical moment makes the poem's imagery of death and springtime all the more meaningful. Whitman suggests that, despite its deep loss, confusion, and despair, the country would eventually heal and flourish again.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Read a brief biography of Whitman from the Poetry Foundation, and find links to more of his works. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/walt-whitman)
- Whitman on Lincoln — Learn more about how Whitman thought of Lincoln in this letter, examined in an article published by the Lincoln Cottage Museum in Washington, D.C. (https://www.lincolncottage.org/walt-whitman-and-president-lincoln/)
- An Article on the Poem — Learn more about the poem, how Whitman saw Lincoln, and why the poem can be read as claiming "an invisible brotherhood" between Whitman and Lincoln in this article from the New York Times. (https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/04/how-whitman-remembered-lincoln/)
- An Early Copy of the Poem — See an image of an early printing of the poem at the Whitman Archive. (https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/193)
- Lincoln's Funeral Train — Learn more about the journey of President Lincoln's funeral train. (https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/president-lincolns-funeral-train)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- A Noiseless Patient Spider
- I Hear America Singing
- O Captain! My Captain!
- The Voice of the Rain
- When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

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