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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2005 Volume I: The Uses of Poetry in the Classroom

Looking Forward: Whitman and the Creative Spirit in American Poetry

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by Clary Carleton

The year 2005 marks the 150th publication anniversary of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—the seminal, much revised volume that helped shape American poetry. The voice was distinctive and brave—introducing a new verse form and giving voice to a mythic America and the democratic principles that would sustain it. This unit provides an introduction to the poetry and thought of the "good gray poet," exploring the legacy of his ideas and their relevance to today's high school students. In his innovative approach to poetry, Whitman looked forward to future poets, who continue a tradition of close observation, celebration, tolerance, and dissent. Whitman is thus read alongside poems by Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, Robert Frost, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, as well as contemporary poets like Galway Kinnell, Lucille Clifton, Yusef Komunyakaa, Nikki Giovanni, Marge Piercy, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Sharon Olds.

The unit emphasizes the role of creative thinking and the craft of poetry. Students' appreciation of poetry and language is enhanced through creative exercises and discussion groups. At the same time, critical reading and analytical skills are developed, preparing students to apply knowledge of poetry in new situations. The final multimedia project involves experimentation with how text, image, sound, and digital technology change how we think about poetry.

(Developed for American Literature, grade 11; recommended for English and Creative Writing, grades 9-12)

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