

Poet Carl Sandburg addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress on February 12, 1959—the 150th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln freed the slaves and was president during the U.S. Civil War between the Union (northern) and Confederate (southern) states from 1861 through 1865. In the second passage of this pairing, Walt Whitman, a great American poet of the nineteenth century, is remembered by a friend in a eulogy (a memorial written for someone who has died). Read the speech and the eulogy and answer the questions that follow.

Speech Honoring Abraham Lincoln

by Carl Sandburg

- 1 Not often in the story of mankind does a man arrive on earth who is both steel and velvet, who is as hard as rock and soft as drifting fog, who holds in his heart and mind the paradox of terrible storm and peace unspeakable and perfect. Here and there across centuries come reports of men alleged to have these contrasts. And the incomparable Abraham Lincoln, born 150 years ago this day, is an approach if not a perfect realization of this character.
- 2 In the time of the April lilacs in the year 1865, on his death, the casket with his body was carried north and west a thousand miles, and the American people wept as never before. Bells sobbed, cities wore crepe,¹ people stood in tears and with hats off as the railroad burial car paused in the leading cities of seven states, ending its journey at Springfield, Illinois, the home town.
- 3 During the four years he was president, he at times, especially in the first three months, took to himself the powers of a dictator. He commanded the most powerful armies till then assembled in modern warfare. He enforced conscription² of soldiers for the first time in American history. Under imperative necessity he abolished the right of habeas corpus.³ He directed politically and spiritually the wild, massive, turbulent forces let loose in civil war.
- 4 He argued and pleaded for compensated emancipation of the slaves. The slaves were property, they were on the tax books along with horses and cattle, the valuation of each slave next to his name on the tax assessor's books. Failing to get action on compensated emancipation, as a chief executive having war powers, he issued the paper by which he declared the slaves to be free under "military necessity." In the end nearly \$4 million worth of property was taken away from those who were legal owners of it, property confiscated, wiped out as by fire and turned to ashes, at his instigation and executive direction. Chattel property⁴ recognized and lawful for 300 years was expropriated, seized without payment.

¹ *crepe* — black cloth used to symbolize mourning

² *conscription* — military draft

³ *habeas corpus* — the right of a prisoner to be brought before a court

⁴ *chattel property* — an item of personal property

5 In the month the war began he told his secretary, John Hay, “My policy is to have no policy.” Three years later in a letter to a Kentucky friend made public, he confessed plainly, “I have been controlled by events.” His words at Gettysburg were sacred; yet strange with a color of the familiar: “We cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far beyond our poor power to add or detract.”

6 He could have said “the brave Union men.” Did he have a purpose in omitting the word *Union*? Was he keeping himself and his utterance clear of the passion that would not be good to look at when the time came for peace and reconciliation? Did he mean to leave an implication that there were brave Union men, and brave Confederate men, living and dead, who had struggled there? We do not know of a certainty. Was he thinking of the Kentucky father whose two sons died in battle, one in Union blue, the other in Confederate gray, the father inscribing on the stone over their double grave, “God knows which was right”? We do not know. . . .

7 While the war winds howled, he insisted that the Mississippi was one river meant to belong to one country, that railroad connection from coast to coast must be pushed through and the Union Pacific Railroad made a reality. While the luck of war wavered and broke and came again, as generals failed and campaigns were lost, he held enough forces of the North together to raise new armies and supply them, until generals were found who made war as victorious war has always been made—with terror, frightfulness, destruction, and on both sides, North and South, valor and sacrifice past words of man to tell.

8 In the mixed shame and blame of the immense wrongs of two crashing civilizations, often with nothing to say, he said nothing, slept not at all, and on occasions he was seen to weep in a way that made weeping appropriate, decent, majestic. . . .

9 The people of many other countries take Lincoln now for their own. He belongs to them. He stands for decency, honest dealing, plain talk, and funny stories. “Look where he came from. Don’t he know all us strugglers, and wasn’t he a kind of tough struggler all his life right up to the finish?” Something like that you can hear in any nearby neighborhood and across the seas.

10 Millions there are who take him as a personal treasure. He had something they would like to see spread everywhere over the world. Democracy? We can’t find words to say exactly what it is, but he had it. In his blood and bones he carried it. In the breath of his speeches and writings it is there. Popular government? Republican institution? Government where the people have the say-so, one way or another telling their elected leaders what they want? He had the idea. It’s there in the lights and shadows of his personality, a mystery that can be lived but never fully spoken in words.

11 Our good friend the poet and playwright Mark Van Doren tells us, “To me, Lincoln seems, in some ways, the most interesting man who ever lived. He was gentle, but his gentleness was combined with a terrific toughness, an iron strength.”

12 How did Lincoln say he would like to be remembered? His beloved friend, Representative Owen Lovejoy of Illinois, had died in May of 1864 and friends wrote to Lincoln and he replied that the pressure of duties kept him from joining them in efforts for a marble monument to Lovejoy, the last sentence of his letter saying, “Let him have the marble monument along with the well-assured and more enduring one in the hearts of those who love liberty, unselfishly, for all men.”

13 So perhaps we may say that the well-assured and most enduring memorial to Lincoln is invisibly there, today, tomorrow, and for a long time yet to come in the hearts of lovers of liberty, men and women who understand that wherever there is freedom there have been those who fought, toiled, and sacrificed for it.

**Eulogy for
WALT WHITMAN**
(1819–1892)

by
ROBERT GREEN INGERSOLL

1 Again we in the mystery of life are brought face-to-face with the mystery of death. A great man, a great American, is dead before us, and we have met to pay a tribute to his greatness and to his worth. His fame is secure. He laid the foundation of it deep in the human heart. He was, above all that I have known, the poet of humanity, of sympathy. Great he was—so great that he rose above the greatest that he met without arrogance; and so great that he stooped to the lowest without conscious condescension.¹ He never claimed to be lower or greater than any other of the sons of man. He came into our generation a free, untrammelled spirit, with sympathy for all. His arm was beneath the form of the sick; he sympathized with the imprisoned and the despised; and even on the brow of crime he was great enough to place the kiss of human sympathy. One of the greatest lines in our literature is his. Speaking of an outcast—“Not until the sun excludes the earth will I exclude you.” A charity as wide as the sky! And whenever there was human suffering, human misfortune, the sympathy of Whitman bent above it as the firmament bends above this earth. He was the poet of that divine democracy that gives equal rights to all the sons and daughters of men. He uttered the great American voice, uttered a song worthy of the great Republic.

2 He was the poet of life. He loved the clouds. He enjoyed the breath of morning, the twilight, the wind, the winding streams. He loved to look at the sea when the winds and waves burst into the whitecaps of joy. He loved the fields, the hills. He was acquainted with trees, with birds, with all the beautiful objects on the earth; and he understood their meaning and used them that he might exhibit his heart to his fellowmen. He was also the poet of love. He was not ashamed of the divine passion that has built every home in the world; that divine passion that has painted every picture and given us every real work of art—that divine passion that has made the world worth living in and gives value to human life. He was the poet of the human race everywhere. His sympathy went out over the seas to all the nations of the earth. And above genius, above all the snowcapped peaks of intelligence, above his art, rises the man—greater than all.

3 He was true absolutely to himself. He was frank, candid, pure, serene, and noble. And for years he was maligned² and slandered, simply because he had the candor of nature. He will be understood yet, and that for which he was condemned will add to the glory and the greatness of his name. He wrote a liturgy for humanity—the greatest gospel that can be preached.

¹ *condescension* — the practice of treating people as inferior to oneself

² *maligned* — spoken about in an evil way

4 He was not afraid to live, not afraid to speak his thoughts. Neither was he afraid to die. Cheerful every moment, the laughing nymphs of day remained that they might clasp the hand of the veiled and silent sisters of the night when they should come. And when they did come, Walt Whitman stretched his hand to both. And so, hand in hand, between smiles and tears, he reached his journey's end.

5 Today we give back to Mother Nature, to her clasp and kiss, one of the bravest, sweetest souls that ever lived in human clay. Since he has lived, death is less fearful than it was before, and thousands and millions will walk down into the dark valley of the shadow, holding Walt Whitman by the hand, long after we are dead.

6 And so I lay this poor wreath upon this great man's tomb. I loved him living and I love him still.

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