

DRUM TAPS

A PLAY IN ONE ACT ADAPTED BY
Lindsay Price

FROM THE POETRY OF
Walt Whitman



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

A theatricalization of Walt Whitman's Civil War poetry. Whitman writes from his first-hand experience, from the first glorifying moments, to the horror of a field hospital, to the exhausted fury of a war gone on too long.

Playwright Bio

Lindsay Price has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator, and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

Synopsis

The original source material for the play is a collection of poems, also called *Drum Taps*, which is found in a larger collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman. The *Drum Taps* poems first appeared in *Leaves of Grass* in 1865. The poems recount Whitman's first-hand experience of the Civil War. He celebrated its beginning; his brother was a soldier. He wrote about his harrowing experience working as a volunteer nurse. He wrote about the loss of life and the death of Lincoln. The poems show his change of attitude toward war as it drew on. The play brings the poems to life through a variety of characters. It starts at the beginning of the war with excitement to see the young men in their clean uniforms, going off to fight for what is right. It ends with a much different tone as the anguish of war has been fully realized. The characters move from the innocence and myth of what war represents to living its reality.

List of Poems (not all lines are used for every poem)

Song of the Banner at Daybreak

Beat! Beat! Drums!

City of Ships

First O Songs for a Prelude

The Artilleryman's Vision
Calvary Crossing the Ford
An Army Corps on the March
By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame
Come Up From the Fields, Father
A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown
To A Certain Civilian
Bivouac on a Mountain Side
The Wound Dresser
Year that Trembled and Reel'd Beneath Me
How Solemn as One by One
Spirit Whose Work is Done

Characters

There are two versions of the play: a large cast version and a small cast version. The text is exactly the same regardless of which version is used.

For the large cast version, the character list is made up of 6m/14w for a total of 20 characters. One of Whitman's themes is "the individual," and to that end all the character names come from individuals mentioned in the larger collection *Leaves of Grass*.

The Poet	The Child	The One-Year Wife	The Lunatic
The School Teacher	The Factory Girl	The Beautiful Sister	The Widow
The Gypsy	The Seamstress	The Immigrant	The Pioneer
The Actress	The Night Watch-man's Daughter		The Soldier
The Farmer	The Clerk	The Tramp	The Grave Digger
The Lawyer			

For the small cast version, the characters are named: Lizbeth, Alice, Meg, Thomas, and Henry.

Themes

War, individuality, obedience, death, parenting/family, illness/health, memory, personal responsibility

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What is your opinion of war?
- ★ In your opinion, why do groups go to war?
- ★ What do you know about the American Civil War?
- ★ What is democratic individuality?
- ★ In your opinion, what is unity of purpose? Do you believe in unity of purpose? Why or why not?
- ★ Have you ever read a poem by Walt Whitman?
- ★ Do you connect to poetry? Why or why not?
- ★ Reflect on this statement: "True poetry focuses on experience, not merely transmits it."

Pre-Read Activities

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is for students to work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.

- » Adaptation definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to the poem. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
 - » What characters can be derived from the poem?
 - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
 - » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute. Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

Drum Traps Adaptation Exercise

- ★ As a class, read Whitman's poem *Cavalry Crossing a Ford*. Go over any unfamiliar vocabulary words.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation definition: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ Note: The playwright made the decision not to change any of Whitman's lines of poetry in their adaptation. Every line is as it is in the original text. Decide if you will allow students to make a true adaptation (make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter) and whether you'll have them keep the lines of poetry intact.

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will have a copy of the poem. Their first task is to think about what characters and locations they could use in a theatrical scene of the poem.
- ★ Next, groups will think about how the lines of the poem could become lines of dialogue.
- ★ Next, groups will discuss, decide, rehearse, and come up with a staged theatrical version of the poem. This is an exploration, rather than an assessed assignment. How do you adapt? What are the challenges?
- ★ After groups present, discuss the similarities and differences of the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges?

Research Project: Author

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of the original poems, Walt Whitman.
 - » Who is Walt Whitman?
 - » What is his background?
 - » When did he write *Drum Taps*?
 - » Did he write any other collections of poems?
 - » Was he a “successful” writer?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they’ve learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they’ve learned.

Research Project: American Civil War

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the American Civil War.

- » What were the causes of the war?
- » Who fought in the war?
- » Who were some significant individuals?
- » What was the outcome of the war?
- » What is something surprising you can share about the Civil War?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they've learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? A quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they've learned.

Letters Home Scene

- ★ Have students research and read letters home from soldiers of various wars. They don't have to be from the Civil War. You can do this in groups and have each group share their findings with the class.
- ★ Discuss the similarities and differences in the letters. What comes across in the words of the soldiers? What do they say? What do they not say? What do they want most?
- ★ Divide students into groups and have them create a scene using a letter as source material. It could be about a character receiving a letter and what that means, or a character trying to hide the truth about war in their letter.
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present.

Write a Poem

- ★ Have students write their own poem about war. What is their opinion? How would they visualize their point of view in words? What images come to mind for them when they think about the topic? What point of view would they want to get across in the poem? What format would they use?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Drum Taps*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening? (NOTE: These questions are for the large cast version.)

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What is the name of the first poem?
3. What is the reaction to war at the beginning of the play?
4. What is the tone of the "Calvary Crossing the Ford" section?
5. What do the characters find out in "Come up from the Fields father"?
6. What is the tone of "To a Certain Civilian"?
7. What stage directions does the playwright include for "The Wound Dresser"?
8. What is the reaction to war by the end of the play?
9. What is the impact of the last lines of the play?
10. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. The playwright offers a couple of suggestions for costumes in the play. Which one do you prefer? What are your own thoughts on costume design for the play?
2. The playwright includes a vocabulary list at the back of the play. Why is understanding unfamiliar words key to an effective theatre production?
3. In the Movement note the playwright says, "Do not leave the physical element out of the picture. It's another piece that is going to make a two-dimensional poem into a three-dimensional play." Why is this key to an effective theatre production?
4. In the Text note the playwright says, "Give humanity to the words just as Whitman does." Why is this key to an effective theatre production?
5. The playwright offers a large cast version and a small cast version. In your opinion, would this text be more effective with a large or small cast?
6. Look at the provided character names for the large cast. What do they tell you about the play?
7. In your opinion, why does the playwright give the characters traditional names for the small cast version?
8. How does the provided staging of the first poem introduce the world of the play?
9. How does the playwright allocate the lines of poetry to characters in the first poem? What does it demonstrate?
10. What is the definition of the word "parley"?
11. There are two moments of song suggested in the play. Why do you think the playwright chose to add these moments?
12. Compare and contrast the structure of the large cast and the small cast versions. The text is the same. What are the differences?

13. In your opinion, is the playwright successful at creating dialogue out of poetry? Why or why not?
14. In your opinion, which poem is the most theatrical? Why?
15. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

- » In your opinion, did you react to the play in the way the playwright intended? Why or why not?
- » What are the playwright and the original author trying to say about war? Cite the text to support your answer.
- » Compare and contrast your own personal feelings about war with how it is presented in the play.
- » What experience does the playwright want you to have with this piece?
- » How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?
- » How does the playwright want you to respond to the poetry?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which moment resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

Post-Read Activities

Adaptation Compare and Contrast

- ★ In the pre-read section, you adapted a section of the original text into an original scene. Now, compare and contrast your adaptation with how the playwright adapted the same moment.
 - » What are the similarities and differences?
 - » Infer why the playwright made some of the choices he did with his version of the scene.

Modern Adaption

- ★ Divide the class into groups. Each group will make a modern version of one of the poems or moments in the play.
- ★ How would they adapt the situation, the characters, and the outcome for the 21st century? What is the modern version of the text? How would modern characters express the text?

Staged Moment

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a moment from the play.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Playwright Process

Playwright Lindsay Price talks about her process of writing and adapting Drum Taps. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

Why did you choose to adapt these poems?

Adaptation is one of my favourite ways to write. I love taking a text in one form and trying to find the theatrical doorway. Sometimes, it's easier than others! This task was especially daunting because I made the choice not to add any dialogue other than the original poetry. I find Whitman's poetry extremely character-driven. Each poem tells a story. But one medium does not necessarily fit easily into another. A poem is not a play.

It's one thing to read about war in a textbook. It's another thing to read an account by someone who was there, who can feel every word they write. And it takes on an entirely new meaning when you read a first-hand account of war through another medium.

Walt Whitman's *Drum Taps* poetry illuminates his experience of the Civil War — his passion for it at the beginning, his despair at Lincoln's death, his visits to the wounded at hospitals, his change of attitude towards war as it drew on.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

It took me over a year to figure out how to transform the poetry into a theatrical form. Poetry is hard to stage. It's a singular experience. My challenge was also in the characterization. I wanted to bring the characters to life and have it make sense to an audience.

What was it like to see the play performed?

I'm thrilled every time I see a high school perform it. I give a little cheer because I can see that it works in the staging. *Drum Taps* is a flesh-and-blood experience and the challenge is well worth it. I'm very proud of the outcome. I recently saw a wonderful production close to home that advanced to their regional competition and another was taken to the International Thespians Festival.

Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

Both have their fun elements and their deep, dark challenges! I like the freedom that a first draft brings, but it's easy for me to back away from a first draft if I don't think it's going well. I like the problem-solving aspect of rewrites and I love answering questions in a draft as a process for rewrites, but it can be easy to be overwhelmed by the lack of forward movement during rewrites. The main thing is to keep the end goal in mind — a play isn't a play until it's finished and produced. If I stop in the middle of a first draft, then it won't become a play.

What is your writing process like?

I like to work on a couple of different plays so that if I ever get stuck, I move from one to the other. At some point in the process, I plan a workshop so that I can see and hear the script. Plays are not meant to be read silently; they need to be seen and heard. A workshop can give me great insight into not only how the script looks and sounds, but also how actors connect to and react to the text. That's invaluable.

What engages you about playwriting?

I love seeing characters live a story and I love watching it happen right in front of me (rather than being distanced from the experience through a movie screen). It's an intimate experience and that is very engaging!