Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O you youths, Western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Have the elder races halted?
Do they drop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

We detachments steady throwing,
Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep,
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Colorado men are we,
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus,
From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,
Central inland race are we, from Missouri, with the continental blood intervein'd,
All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O resistless restless race!
O beloved race in all! O my breast aches with tender love for all!
O I mourn and yet exult, I am rapt with love for all,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Come my children with tan faces.
Follow in order. Get your weapons ready. Do you have your pistols?
Do you have your sharp-edged axes? Pioneers! O Pioneers!
tarry: to wait, delay
sinewy: muscular, strong
debouch: to emerge
detachment: the dispatch of a military unit
primeval: original or ancient
upheaving: to thrust upward
gully: a deep ditch
exult: to rejoice greatly
See my children, resolute children,  
By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,  
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

On and on the compact ranks,  
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill'd,  
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O to die advancing on!  
Are there some of us to droop and die? has the hour come?  
Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and sure the gap is fill’d.  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All the pulses of the world,  
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,  
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Life's involv'd and varied pageants,  
All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their work,  
All the seamen and the landsmen, all the masters with their slaves,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All the hapless silent lovers,  
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,  
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

I too with my soul and body,  
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,  
Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Lo, the darting bowling orb!  
Lo, the brother orbs around, all the clustering suns and planets,  
All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with dreams,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

These are of us, they are with us,  
All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait behind,  
We to-day's procession heading, we the route for travel clearing,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

O you daughters of the West!  
O you young and elder daughters! O you mothers and you wives!  
Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Minstrels latent on the prairies!  
(Shrouded bards of other lands, you may rest, you have done your work,)  
Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Not for delectations sweet,  
Not the cushion and the slipper, not the peaceful and the studious,  
Not the riches safe and palling, not for us the tame enjoyment,  
Pioneers! O Pioneers!
Do the feasters gluttonous feast?
Do the corpulent sleepers sleep? have they lock'd and bolted doors?
Still be ours the diet hard, and the blanket on the ground,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Has the night descended?
Was the road of late so toilsome? did we stop discouraged nodding on our way?
Yet a passing hour I yield you in your tracks to pause oblivious,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Till with sound of trumpet,
Far, far off the daybreak call-hark! how loud and clear I hear it wind,
Swift! to the head of the army!-swift! spring to your places,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

BIOGRAPHY AND BACKGROUND

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was born on May 31, 1819 at West Hills, Long Island in New York. His father Walter Whitman, a carpenter and farmer, moved the family to Brooklyn when the poet was four in hopes of finding better opportunities for employment. In Brooklyn, Whitman attended the compulsory six years of public school. When he left school at the age of eleven, he began working as an office boy. One of his employers took a liking to him and gave him a subscription to a local lending library, where the young Whitman was able to devour the writings of Sir Walter Scott and other great poets.

In 1831, Whitman began working for a weekly newspaper, the Long Island Patriot. It was here that he first broke into print with a few sentimental pieces of filler material. After a series of jobs in the printing and newspaper businesses, and even a stint teaching school, he started his own newspaper, the weekly Long Islander, in 1838. However, after only a year, Whitman sold the newspaper and went back to working for other publications. For the next decade or so, Whitman worked as a journalist or editor for various
newspapers in New York City and Brooklyn. He changed jobs often because his liberal opinions and his support for Democratic Party politics often got him in trouble. In 1848, Whitman traveled to New Orleans by riverboat on the Mississippi River to work for the New Orleans Daily Crescent. For a poet who would later write about the American experience, this was his only notable experience of travel until much later in his life. He returned to New York via the Great Lakes after only a few months.

During the next five years, from 1850-55, Whitman seemed to do little outwardly, but this half decade constituted the most important period of the poet’s inner life, for it was during this time that he composed the poems in the first edition of Leaves of Grass. This small volume of poetry, published in 1855, was Whitman’s first book of verse, but it was to change the face of American poetry. (Whitman had previously published a few mediocre pieces of didactic poetry, but none came close to the quality of the poems in Leaves of Grass.) The book contained twelve untitled poems and a preface that called for an American literature and an American poet. The public did not know what to make of Whitman’s poetry—he wrote about America, but some of them contained shocking language and even more shocking themes, and moreover, they were not written in traditional poetic forms with stanzas, rhyme, and meter. Some critics attacked the poetry, while others, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, congratulated the poet. Leaves of Grass went through a total of nine editions (some of which were reprintings of previous editions), as Whitman added pieces to the collection as well as reorganized and revised previous poems. Critics consider the third edition published in 1860 to be the most significant and successful volume, as it exhibited the heights of Whitman’s experiments with the English language.

Whitman was deeply affected by the Civil War. When his brother George was wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, he left for Washington D.C. to find his brother. After being reunited with George, the poet remained in Washington where he worked for the government and visited wounded soldiers in area hospitals. Whitman published the collection Drum-Taps, a response to the war, in 1865; he later added Sequel to Drum-Taps to the volume. Drum-Taps and Sequel contained the poems “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (the poem chosen in this year’s curriculum) as well as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “O Captain! My Captain!” (two poems written as a tribute to President Lincoln after his assassination).

In 1873, Whitman suffered a stroke that left his left side paralyzed. He was forced to move in with his brother George who now lived in Camden, New Jersey. However, the poet continued to write and publish. Whitman died in 1892 and was buried in Camden, New Jersey. At the time of his death, he still had not received the recognition that he deserved as an innovator of language and a prophet of American poetry.

SELECTED WORKS OF WHITMAN

- Leaves of Grass (1855, first edition, poetry)
- Drum-Taps (1865, poetry)

OVERVIEW AND CLASSIFICATION

The poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” first appeared in 1865 in the volume Drum-Taps, but it was later republished in a collection called Birds of Passage. The poem is written mostly in the first-person plural perspective (using the word “we”). It is a rather unusual poem for Whitman because it consists of a more traditional structure with stanzas, meter, and a refrain. (Whitman pioneered, excuse the pun, verse written in free form.) However, both the spirited, rousing tone and the theme of American expansion are common characteristics of Whitman’s work. The diction (language) is eloquent.
“Pioneers! O Pioneers!” consists of twenty-six stanzas. A stanza is a set of lines that makes up a section of a poem, just as paragraphs create separate sections in prose. Each stanza contains four lines, two long lines sandwiched between two short lines. The short lines are all about the same length; however, the long lines vary from stanza to stanza. The lines are unrhymed.

Now let’s analyze the poem for its meter. This is called scansion. We will mark the stressed syllable with the “/” symbol and the unstressed syllable with the “U” symbol. We will also divide each foot, or basic unit of meter, with the “|” symbol. In the first stanza:

1. / U U U U /
   Come my tan-faced children,

2. / U U U U U U /
   Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,

3. / U U U U U /
   Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?

4. / U U U /
   Pioneers! O Pioneers!

In the second stanza:

5. / U U U U /
   For we cannot tarry here,

6. / U U U U U U U /
   We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,

7. / U U U U U U /
   We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,

8. / U U U /
   Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Already we can tell that most feet in the poem are trochees. A trochee is a unit of meter that contains one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable. According to the official curriculum the trochaic meter is suitable for direct address. However, Whitman does not maintain the trochaic meter throughout the lines. There are a few dactyl feet, each with one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. There are also a few other variations, such as a final stressed sound at the end of some lines.

Nevertheless, the rhythm of the poem is strong and regular. The energetic rhythm creates a sense of urgency that is appropriate to a piece that is a rousing call to action. Along with the refrain, or repeated line at the end of each stanza—“Pioneers! O Pioneers!”—the poem presents a martial beat suitable for a march.

All of the lines in the poem are end-stopped lines. That is they all end with a grammatical pause. The poet uses many instances of caesura, or pause found within a line. The caesuras help break up the longer lines. (Or else you couldn’t say them in one breath.) Shorter lines help convey the sense of urgency. The poet also uses elision, in which a syllable of a word is left out. Examples include: “fang’d” (line 43), “fill’d” (line 50), and “involv’d” (line 61). Elision helps to make a word fit the meter of the line.
Whitman uses traditional sound patterns such as alliteration, consonance, assonance, and onomatopoeia. **Alliteration** is the repetition of beginning consonant sounds. **Consonance** is the repetition of consonant sounds. **Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds. **Onomatopoeia** is the use of a word that imitates the sound that the word represents. Let’s find some examples of each in the poem.

**Alliteration:**
- We must **march** my darlings, we must **bear** the **brunt** of danger
- O **resistless** restless race
- Raise the **mighty** mother mistress

**Consonance:**
- Do they droop **and end** their lesson, wearied **over there** beyond the seas
- Conquering, holding, **daring**, **venturing** as we go the unknown ways
- All **for primal needed work**, while the **followers** there in embryo wait behind

**Assonance:**
- We must **march** my **darlings**, we must bear the **brunt** of danger
- All the **forms** and shows, all the **workmen** at their **work**
- Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united

**Onomatopoeia:**
- Soon I hear you coming **warbling**, soon you rise and tramp amid us
The theme of America was very important to Whitman. To the poet, America was much more than a nation; it was a concept, a manifestation of the democratic ideal. He believed that democracy was the greatest system a society could adopt. Therefore, his celebrations of “America” are really more than just patriotic anthems; they are joyous proclamations in favor of a democratic ideal, under which all citizens could be equal.

“Pioneers! O Pioneers!” encourages a Westward expansion of American terrain, an endorsement of the policy of Manifest Destiny, which held that America had a God-given right to expand westward. Yet on a deeper level, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” advocates much more than just territorial expansion; it indicates hope that the American ideal of democracy and equality might extend to other lands and peoples. Thus, when Whitman’s narrator proclaims, “We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend” (line 7), he speaks in terms of both territorial expansion and democratic idealism.

Another implicit theme in “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” is the need for a post-Civil War reconciliation. Having treated wounded soldiers from both the North and the South, Whitman felt great sympathy for both sides. How might these two factions be united once again in the aftermath of such a brutal war? Whitman felt that the West was an ideal that could unite the North and the South. Instead of fighting one another, they could mend the damaged bonds between them by taking part in the common goal of Westward exploration and expansion. Lines such as “On and on the compact ranks, / With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill’d, / Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping, / Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (lines 49-52) remind us of the Civil War and yet they assert that the memories of the war can be overcome by the “never stopping” movement westward.

A final theme we shall consider in this poem is one very crucial to Whitman’s poetry in general: the relationship between the individual and the external world. Notice how the subject of the poem sometimes shifts from the collective “we” to the individual “I” of the narrator, most conspicuously in lines 69-72: “I too with my soul and body, / We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way, / Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing, / Pioneers! O Pioneers!” The narrator looks inward for a moment here, and considers his own sense of self amidst the thronging crowd. In a secularized trinity, he counts his self, soul, and body as a “curious trio,” all of which combine to form the “I” which began the stanza. This may be difficult to comprehend, but it is common of Whitman’s narrator to shift the focus from the group to the individual, and then to consider that individual in terms of its component parts, becoming an individualized “we.” Although the significance of this technique may evade us, we can interpret it as a conscientious attempt to analyze the relationship between the group and the individual, inciting us to ask, “How does an individual change once he or she becomes a member of a group?” and “Are there, in fact, opposing groups within an individual person?”

A CLOSING NOTE: LONGFELLOW VS. WHITMAN

Although Longfellow and Whitman were contemporaries, Longfellow was much more highly regarded during his lifetime. Longfellow enjoyed a professorship as well as financial security from his poetry; whereas, Whitman frequently changed jobs and did not gain much financial reward from his writing. However, in the long run, Whitman’s work is the one that has lasted. In fact, Whitman is now regarded as one of the greatest American poets, while Longfellow’s star has long since faded.

Let’s look at a passage from Latin American writer and poet Borges. His writing brings us a critical opinion of the Longfellow vs. Whitman comparison:

Two memorable books appeared in New York in the year 1855, both of an experimental nature, though very different from one another. The first, instantly famous and today relegated to textbook anthologies or the curiosity of scholars and children, was Longfellow's Hiawatha. Longfellow wanted to give the Indians who once lived in New England a prophetic and mythical epic poem in English. In quest of meter that would not bring the ordinary ones to mind and that might seem native, he turned to the Finnish Kalevala.