# When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d

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[**The Poem**](http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.jscc.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=91abd1ae-6cbe-49b0-8d53-01be33099a07%40pdc-v-sessmgr05&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#toc)

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is a long poem in free verse divided into sixteen numbered sections. Written shortly after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, the poem expresses both Walt Whitman’s grief and his effort to incorporate the president’s death into an understanding of the universal cycle of life and death.

The first two sections are devoted to lamentation, to the poet’s sense that he will never be able to overcome his despair over the loss of the one he loved, and to the premonition of catastrophe he had experienced in his observation of the drooping western star. Nature itself seems obliterated by the “black murk” hiding the star.

In section 3, the poet shifts his attention to the lilac bush blooming in the dooryard. The tall lilac bush, with its heart-shaped leaves, is a natural symbol of the human heart and its capacity to mourn but also of its capacity to renew itself, as the lilac bush is renewed each spring. The flower’s powerful scent stirs the poet’s memory of the continual cycles of nature and stimulates both sadness and delight, which he expresses in breaking off a sprig of lilac in tribute to and memory of Lincoln.

Section 4 introduces the image of the solitary warbling thrush, which the poet later associates (in section 10) with his own warbling for the dead. Not only is grief natural, it is also what unites human beings and nature, and it is what allows the poet to see in the cycle of the seasons a reason for the coming of death. Sections 5 and 6 describe the procession of Lincoln’s coffin, the spectacle of a whole society mourning its loss and acknowledging the presence of death, an inescapable fact that leads the poet (in sections 7 through 14) to merge his individual sorrow with that of society and with the evidence that nature presents of birth, growth, and death.

Section 14 intensifies the poet’s identification with death; he creates a lyric of welcome to “delicate death,” calling it a “dark mother,” a “strong deliveress” from the struggle of existence, a peaceful release into the elements of the universe. Section 15 takes this more assured feeling about death and suggests that the horrible suffering of the Civil War battlefields, the grief of mothers and children for those who were slain, has become transformed into a vision of men at rest, enjoying relief from the agony associated with the memories of the living.

Summing up in section 16 his visions of the lilac blooming in the dooryard, the reciprocal song of poet and thrush, and the governing image of the drooping western star, the poet has found a way both to contain his anguish and to find its expression in the natural and human elements he has described: “Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,/ There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.”

[**Forms and Devices**](http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.jscc.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=91abd1ae-6cbe-49b0-8d53-01be33099a07%40pdc-v-sessmgr05&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#toc)

Because Whitman feels so strongly that human grief must be understood as part of the recurrent cycle of nature, of the change and the return of the seasons, he relies on the simplest of all devices: repetition. Thus the lines of the first section are repeated in several sections, especially at the end of the poem, which focuses on the images of lilac and star and on the bird’s song, which echoes and evokes the poet’s own song. Indeed the poem has an echoing effect, as if the poet’s first choice of words in sections 1 through 4 must be given similar answering words in subsequent sections.

In another kind of repetition, the poet takes a word such as “warble” and applies it both to the bird and to himself, making the word stand for the identity between himself and nature. Similarly, his precise observation of the “delicate-color’d blossoms” of the lilac later merges (in section 14) into his ode to “delicate death.” By offering a sprig of lilac to Lincoln, in other words, the poet is signifying his understanding of this individual instance of death, which then becomes linked to his expanded awareness (later in the poem) of how all death is figured in Lincoln’s loss.

What often seems to be merely reiteration of detail — as in the poet’s description (in section 13) of the thrush singing in the swamps and out of the dusk, the cedar, and the pines — is repeated at the very end of the poem, suggesting that what the poet observes in nature is what he becomes; it is all “twined” together in his nature as a poet. Only by the repetition of images does the poet gather his data, so to speak, his rich, deep, absorption of the meaning of the universe. This absorption is first signaled to him by the drooping star, which, he implies (several times in the poem), provides a clue and is itself a marker — as are the poem’s repeated words — of the necessity, indeed the desirability, of death. Consequently, the poet makes of death a common, even a comfortable experience rather than the aberrant, shocking event presented in the first section.

By the device of repetition, the poet accustoms himself to the manifold manifestations of death. Each recurrence of images such as the “delicious” coming of evening (section 12) and the “mastering odor” of the lilac (section 13) builds up a body of sensuous experience, of sight and smell, that in itself excites a desire for repetition, a longing to see and smell the lilacs bloom again; it also imparts a realization that this very joy cannot be attained without a participation in the rites of death.

[**Themes and Meanings**](http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.jscc.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=91abd1ae-6cbe-49b0-8d53-01be33099a07%40pdc-v-sessmgr05&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#toc)

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” never mentions President Lincoln by name, nor does it mention the Civil War directly; Lincoln’s death and the war are the occasion for the poet’s meditation on death and its place in the human and natural universe. The poet knows that his personal grief is a national grief — he admits as much in his references (in section 6) to the coffin passing through the streets — and his task is to transform his individual mourning into an evocation of feelings that can be universally shared.

The response to Lincoln’s death is so overwhelming that the event is like the death or fall of a star — a momentous occurrence that demands the poet’s fullest measure of understanding. Nowhere does he explicitly connect the drooping star and Lincoln, but in the first section the two are joined by proximity, and later they are joined by the poet’s tendency to interpret his feelings in terms of what he sees and absorbs in nature. Lincoln is to his society as the star is to the heavens — an analogical view of existence that the poet pursues in the bond he feels with the solitary singing bird.

Implicit also in the poem is Whitman’s assertion that the true significance of Lincoln’s death can be grasped only by poetry — not by rational, logical thought, but by the rhythmical organization of sound patterns and images that is identical to the repetitive patterns of life. The poet strives for the presentation of a whole experience, not merely a description of his feelings toward Lincoln’s death or toward death itself. Instead, the poem is meant to be an experience, a dramatization of the natural cycle, a piece of an ongoing phenomenon to which Whitman alludes in his references to “ever-returning spring” and his insistence that “I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn,” as though he is still present, speaking now and not at some point in the past.

The poet’s frequent use of the present tense, as though the experience he describes is happening “now,” is his way of intensifying an identification with the poem itself that transcends the occasion of its composition — Lincoln’s assassination — in order to explore the human reaction to death and the growth of the poet’s own perceptions, as evidenced in his last two lines. In them, his sensibility unites the human and natural realms, thus creating the very form and meaning of the poem (the poet’s “chant”) out of “the dead I loved so well.” Reading the poem, like smelling the lilacs or hearing the bird sing again, recalls death, summons it to full consciousness, and makes it a part of the present, like the “ever-returning spring.”

Rollyson, Carl. “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” *Masterplots II: Poetry, Revised Edition*, Jan. 2002, pp. 1–2.