

PERSHING MURAL PROJECT CURRICULUM

Learning From the Past, Understanding the Present, and Discovering the Future



THE PERSHING MURAL - A NEBRASKA CULTURAL LANDMARK

Celebrating the Pershing Mural Analyzing “An Ode to a Nebraska Mural”

In this lesson, students will be introduced to “Ode to a Nebraska Mural”, the work of Nebraska State Poet Matt Mason. They will explore the artistic imagery and expression found in both the Poem and the Mural. The students will be invited to give their interpretations of the “Ode” in small groups and complete a worksheet to share with the class.

Included in this Lesson:

- Lesson Plan: Celebrating the Pershing Mural
- Power point: Quick Facts About the Pershing Mural
- PDF: “Ode to a Nebraska Mural”
- PDF: “Ode to a Nebraska Mural” Worksheet
- Digital Image of the Pershing Mural

Note: To discover interesting facts and observations about the Pershing Mural and the artists who created it, it is suggested students complete the “Writing an Artist Statement” and “Connecting with the Pershing Mural” lessons prior to undertaking “Celebrating the Pershing Mural”. There is great synergy between the three lessons as one builds upon the other.

There are many excellent copyrighted guides to use in teaching students the various methods to analyze poetry. Some examples include:

Matrix Education: How to Analyze a Poem in Six Steps

<https://www.matrix.edu.au/beginners-guide-poetry/how-to-analyse-a-poem-in-6-steps/>

Delaware County Library System: How to Teach Poetry Analysis

https://www.delcolibraries.org/sites/default/files/1_how_to_teach_poetry_analysis.jr.pdf

Rockin' Resources: Step by Step to Effective Poetry Analysis

<https://rockinresources.com/2018/02/step-step-effective-poetry-analysis.html>

Nebraska Standards Addressed:

Present: LA.6.RI.3 Explain how an author establishes and conveys a perspective or purpose in an informational text.

Connect: LA.6.RP.1 Determine the implied or explicit theme of a literary text and how it develops over the course of a text

Respond: LA.6.RP.6 Analyze a literary text to answer and develop inferential and evaluative questions to enhance the comprehension of self and others, quoting or paraphrasing specific evidence from the text.

Create: LA.6.RI.2 Explain how a key individual, event, or idea or concept is introduced and developed, drawing on specific supporting details in an informational text.

Objectives:

- After completing the lesson, the students will be able to list five relevant facts about the Pershing Mural.
- The students will analyze and list their own personal observations about the poem "Ode to a Nebraska Mural".
- The students will engage in small-group and class-wide discussions to share their analysis of the poem.
- The students will be encouraged to be receptive to differing opinions and conclusions in a thoughtful and respectful way.

Grade Level:

Written at 6th Grade Level (educators are encouraged to adjust the lesson to meet needs of Pre-K to 12th Grade)

Materials Needed:

Enlarged digital image of the Pershing Mural for class discussion, copy of the Poem for each student, copy of the Worksheet for each student, copy of Pershing Mural image for each student or group of students (digital on a computer or tablet or hard copy), pencils

Time Requirement:

1-3 (50 minute) class sessions

Vocabulary:

Nebraska State Poet: A designation that recognizes and honors a Nebraska poet of exceptional talent and accomplishment.

Commission: A Commission occurs when a client hires an artist or writer to create an artwork or literary work based on their request.

Civics: Study of the rights and duties of citizenship

Ode: A lyric poem marked by joy and praise of feeling and emotion. There can be varying length of line and complexity.

Lyric Poem: A short poem with songlike qualities that express the poet's personal emotions and feelings.

Grapple: To take hold of someone and struggle (wrestle) as part of a fight.

Atlas: In ancient Greek mythology, Atlas was the bearer of the Heavens; a person who supports a heavy burden.

Topography: the study and description of the physical features of an area.

Direct Instruction:

Just the Facts About the Mural

In the 1960's, when the Pershing Auditorium was in full use, NBC aired a television show about LA Police officers called "Dragnet". When Sgt. Joe Friday, a detective on the show, was conducting an interview, he was famous for saying, "Just the facts, ma'am". In keeping with Joe Friday, here are "the facts" we know about the Pershing Mural:

- The Mural was originally installed on the west side of the Pershing Auditorium in 1957.
- It measured 140' 8" wide and 38' 3" high and was the largest mural of its kind in the Western Hemisphere at the time of its installation.
- It was made up of more than 763,000 one-inch ceramic tile pieces in 40 different shades/colors.
- The design was intricate and detailed; some of the tiles had two colors in diagonals in a single tile.
- It was a montage-type of work depicting the many activities that would be seen in the building.
- The Mural remained mounted on the Auditorium from 1957 when it was installed until 2023 when it was removed and saved prior to the Auditorium's demolition—a span of close to 70 years.
- Between 2014 and 2023, the auditorium was no longer in use and after much debate, it was decided that the Auditorium would be demolished.
- Many decision makers were against saving the iconic Mural; however, a grassroots effort of people who recognized the importance of the Mural raised the funds in a short amount of time to save the Mural.
- From 2023 until its reinstallation at Wyuka Cemetery and Park, the Mural was in storage for restoration and reassembly.
- Once reinstalled, the Mural becomes a place for gatherings and enjoyment for generations to come.
- The Pershing Auditorium, former home of the Pershing Mural, was located at 226 Centennial Mall, approximately 4 blocks (as the crow flies) from the Nebraska State Capitol Building in Lincoln.
- The Nebraska State Capitol Building is where the Legislature (our elected officials) meets. Much debate takes place during legislative sessions.

- Atop the 400' tower of the Capitol Building is a 12 ½' pedestal upon which is located a 19 ½' sculpture of a barefoot man in rolled up shirt sleeves and pant legs at work sowing his field—this sculpture is called “The Sower” and is not only a work of art but also a lightning rod.

Nebraska’s State Poet

Matt Mason, based in Omaha, was named Nebraska’s third State Poet, beginning his term in 2019.



Matt Mason
Nebraska State Poet 2019 – 2024

From Humanities Nebraska: “*The Nebraska State Poet is a designation that recognizes and honors a Nebraska poet of exceptional talent and accomplishment. The State Poet serves a five-year renewable term as an advocate for poetry, literacy, and literature in Nebraska. The duties of the State Poet include giving public presentations and readings, leading workshops and discussions, and providing other outreach in schools, libraries, literary festivals, and various venues in rural and urban communities throughout the state. The Nebraska State Poet is selected based on artistic excellence, exemplary professionalism demonstrated by significant publications and special honors, an established history of community service in the advancement of poetry in Nebraska, and the ability to present poetry and interact effectively with a public audience.*”

In 2023, Nebraska’s State Poet, Matt Mason, received a commission from the Pershing Mural Historic Preservation Committee to create a piece inspired by the Pershing Mural. In March of 2024, he delivered his finished

work entitled “Ode to a Nebraska Mural” written in the fashion of John Keats. For reference, John Keats (1795 – 1821) was an English poet who became famous for the series of “Odes” he wrote (e.g. “Ode to a Nightingale”). An Ode is a lyrical poem with song-like qualities that express the author’s feelings and personal emotion through natural imagery.

Ode to a Nebraska Mural

By Matt Mason, Nebraska State Poet

--For the Pershing Mural and the Pershing Mural Historic Preservation
Committee

--after John Keats

You haven’t moved now in seven decades,
holding poses – jump shot, star-crossed lovers,
mid-punch, mid-buck, mid-box step, mid-parade—
oh, my friends, made inch-by-inch from colors
and, here, finally a blink of rest
before your song resumes.
Will you miss your city view?
The Sower up on his dome,
these neckties and dresses headed to debate—
their dry words you watch, year-by-year fade?

Thankfully, the opera you’ve been singing
won’t change its single note, only your view,
your grapple kicks back off in trees, in peace,
centuries left perfecting each still move
you’ve held for a lifetime already
and now keep holding lifetimes more:
the acrobat’s suspense—will he catch her?—
circus performers in world record balance,
hockey shot in neverending overtime,
spirit, culture, shaded tiles that spell our lives.

What do you teach us, you abstract atlas,
your lines and shades, your curved topography,
your hints of our broad state, our Nebraska,
our friends here, our neighbors, our family
eternally in this single breath

that you'll still breathe long past my death:
you are reminders and promises preserved,
our differences we build with, our grit,
our truth—choreographed mid-move and, here, elevated—
our beauty—so necessary to be celebrated.

Guided and Independent Practice:

After the students have reviewed the facts about the Mural and have been introduced to Nebraska State Poet, Matt Mason, the teacher will follow this process:

- 1) Break the students into small groups of three to five students.
 - a) Hand out a hard copy of “Ode to a Nebraska Mural” to each student.
 - b) Each group should have access to either a digital (tablet or computer) or hard copy of the image of the Pershing Mural.
- 2) Ask the students to silently read the poem to themselves.
- 3) The teacher will next read the poem aloud with feeling, emotion, and a songlike quality.
- 4) Ask the students to read the poem to themselves again, making notations of their observations and feelings in the side margins, circling words or phrases they don't understand or that they found intriguing.
- 5) Hand out the “Ode” worksheets (found below and in a download) to each group.
 - a) Either each student will be asked to complete a worksheet individually or one worksheet per group will be completed with one student acting as the recorder.
 - b) If students work in groups to answer the questions and give observations, there does not need to be consensus for answers; multiple answers may be shared and all should be recorded.
- 6) The students will work quietly and respectfully as they listen and share opinions and observations with each other.
- 7) Once they have completed their worksheet(s) and are satisfied with their analysis, the class will come together again as a whole to share their “findings”.

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think Matt Mason called his poem an “ode”?
- Does reading/hearing the poem make you view the Mural any differently? How?
- Give examples of songlike qualities of the poem written by Matt Mason.
- Were there any parts of the poem you didn’t understand?
- What was your favorite part of the poem?
- What imagery did the poet use to make the Mural feel like a living, breathing thing?
- What are the five insights, conclusions, opinions, or questions you recorded on your worksheet you want to share with the entire class?
- What did you learn by discussing the poem with your group that gave you new insights you may not have found on your own.

Evaluation:

The students will be evaluated on:

- 1) Working together productively and respectfully in discussing and reviewing the poem.
- 2) Completing the Poem Worksheet completely and thoughtfully.
- 3) Participating in discussion.

Note: After completion of this lesson, an additional activity could invite students to write their own “ode” based on an another “inspiration” found in Nebraska.

Closure:

Poetry in itself is an art form. And visual art can and does inspire poetry. Such is the case with Matt Mason’s “Ode to a Nebraska Mural”. Just like the mural, the Ode is full of imagery and expression that come alive before our eyes—they are the perfect marriage of the two artistic media.

Resources:

Humanities Nebraska <https://humanitiesnebraska.org/programs/nebraska-state-poet/> *Public Domain*

Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia: John Keats
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Keats *Public Domain*

“Ode to a Nebraska Mural” Worksheet

Just like no two people share the same fingerprints (even identical twins!), no two people share the same brain anatomy. Because every one of us is so wonderfully distinctive, we each think differently and have our own opinions, perceptions, interests, talents, and abilities. It’s a great reminder for us to keep an open mind, be respectful, listen to each other, share our thoughts and ideas, and embrace new thinking because we are each unique; it is how we grow as individuals and a society. So, stretch your beautiful brains. There are no right or wrong answers when it comes to your interpretation, so don’t be afraid to think outside the box.

Directions:

- 1) Read the first question.
- 2) Discuss this question as a group then record your answer(s).
- 3) Repeat this process for each additional question.

Who is the speaker of the Poem? (A speaker is the voice of the poem, like a narrator.)

To whom is the poem speaking?

What is the central idea of the Poem? Is there a message Matt Mason is trying to convey?

An Ode is supposed to have a lyrical (song-like) quality. Do you think Matt Mason achieved that? Give examples.

What did the poem make you think about?

How did the Poem make you feel?

Did the poem encourage you to use your senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting)? Give examples.

From reading the poem, how do you think Matt Mason feels about the Pershing Mural? How do you think the Mural feels about us?

What is the overall mood (e.g. happy, anxious, excited, tired, etc.) or feeling of the poem? Give at least two examples?

Describe any personal connection you feel to the poem?

What do you think is the best "line" in the poem?

What stands out to you in this poem?

In what ways did Matt Mason's word choices make it seem like the Mural was alive—a living, breathing thing? Give examples.

How did the use of punctuation (commas, dashes, etc.) change the temp of the poem?

Describe any hidden meaning you found in the poem?

If you could, what questions would you ask Matt Mason about this poem?

List five insights, conclusions, opinions, or questions you will share with the entire class:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____

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