AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

MEMORIAL DAY

Memorial Day was first observed in 1866, after the Civil War, by four women who chose to decorate the graves of both the 2,500 Confederate and 32 Union soldiers in a Columbus, Mississippi cemetery. This act inspired a Northerner, Francis Miles Finch, to write the poem, “The Blue and the Grey,” about this event. The day then became known as Decoration Day, and focused on decorating the graves of the 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers who died in the Civil War. Three years later, on May 30, 1868, Commander in Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, John A. Logan, established Decoration Day throughout the country. After WWII, Decoration Day became more widely known as Memorial Day, a day to honor those who have died in service of the US military.

A core methodology of Civic Spirit is to ground discussion of complex ideas in textual study. Reading the texts below with students and asking them to compare the diverse perspectives therein will help students ground any conversation about the Civil War and its aftermath as well as how we commemorate Memorial Day today.

Source 1: "The Blue and the Grey" by Francis Miles Finch

By the flow of the inland river,
Whence the fleets of iron have fled,
Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver,
Asleep are the ranks of the dead:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Under the one, the Blue,
Under the other, the Gray

These in the robings of glory,
Those in the gloom of defeat,
All with the battle-blood gory,
In the dusk of eternity meet:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgement-day
Under the laurel, the Blue,
Under the willow, the Gray.

From the silence of sorrowful hours
The desolate mourners go,
Lovingly laden with flowers
Alike for the friend and the foe;
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgement-day;
Under the roses, the Blue,
Under the lilies, the Gray.

Source 1: "The Blue and the Grey" by Francis Miles Finch

So with an equal splendor,
The morning sun-rays fall,
With a touch impartially tender,
On the blossoms blooming for all:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment-day;
Embroidered with gold, the Blue,
Mellowed with gold, the Gray.

So, when the summer calleth,
On forest and field of grain,
With an equal murmur falleth
The cooling drip of the rain:
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment -day,
Wet with the rain, the Blue
Wet with the rain, the Gray.

Questions for Discussion:

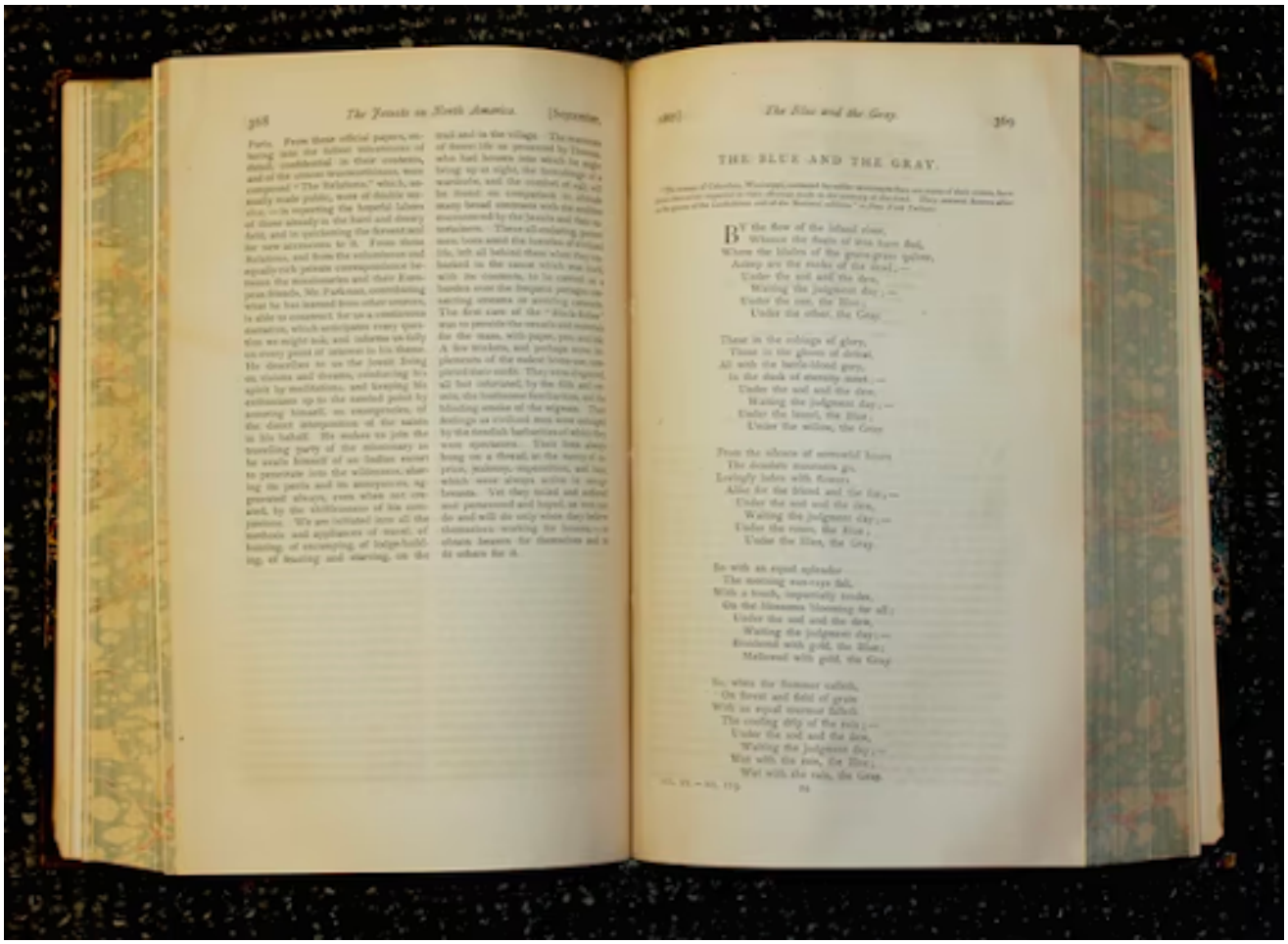
1. What is the central theme of the poem?
2. What commonalities is Francis Miles Finch trying to find between the Union and Confederate soldiers buried together in this Mississippi cemetery?
3. How do you feel about these commonalities? What do you think of the way he equates the deaths of the soldiers who fought for the US and those that rebelled against the US?
4. Does the fact that Francis Miles Finch is a Northerner change the way you understand the message of the poem? How so?
5. Does information about the origin of Memorial Day change your understanding and feeling about the day? If so, how and why has it changed your view?

For Further Discussion:

In March 1865, Lincoln was inaugurated for a second term as President of the US. He ended his speech with the following thoughts:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

1. What is the message that Lincoln wants Americans to take from his inaugural address?
2. Do you think it was the right message to send before the Civil War officially ended? Why or why not?



THE BLUE AND THE GRAY.

By the flow of the inland river,
Whence the fleets of iron have fled,
Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver,
Asleep are the ranks of the dead,—
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment day;—
Under the one, the Blue;
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In the dusk of eternity meet;—
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Alike for the friend and the foe;—
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Under the roses, the Blue;
Under the lilies, the Gray.

So with an equal splendor
The morning sun-rays fall,
With a touch, impartially tender,
On the blossoms blooming for all;—
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment day;—
Broidered with gold, the Blue;
Mellowed with gold, the Gray.

So, when the Summer calleth,
On forest and field of grain
With an equal voice kindly
The evening dew falls;—
Under the sod and the dew,
Waiting the judgment day;—
Wet with the rain, the Blue;
Wet with the rain, the Gray.

"The Blue and the Grey" in a bound volume of the 1867 Atlantic Monthly magazine where Finch's poem first was published.

Decoration Day at Friendship Cemetery in Columbus Mississippi.